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The worst of all fears is the fear of living !
There are some problems in life that have no solution.
There are some situations that simply must be lived through.
Survival calls for the ability to cope and determination
but most of all

A WILL TO LIVE

By

Helena Mia

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INTRODUCTION

What you are about to read is no fiction. Unfortunately it is my true story. It was written 61 years ago in German and in Polish. Two years after I arrived in New York I translated it into English.

Two people read my story – one questioned the authenticity, the other wanted to know who wrote it. I was very hurt by their reaction and decided not to show it anymore. It remained dormant and unread because as the years passed my outlook, mentality, and perception changed. I would be tempted to correct mistakes, change style, phraseology, etc. I was advised not to do it - all authenticity would be lost.

So here it is - finally surfacing! Why now? Because, we survivors of the Holocaust are almost an extinct species.

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SWEDEN – LATE SUMMER 1945 – HOSPITAL IN SIGTUNA

Not a ripple on the smooth water surface. The trees stand dark and silent against the light grey sky. Is it dusk or twilight? It doesn't get dark here. How does one get used to white nights?

How peaceful, how soothing the scenery. My bed is near the window. I have a lovely view of the garden, water and trees. Sailboats glide smoothly in the distance. The beauty and tranquility of the surrounding scenery calms my tormented mind, brings solace to inner pain.

Physical pain is being taken care of by gentle, caring staff but the troubled thoughts gnaw…

Doctors, nurses, orderlies and therapists come and go. They are solicitous, trying to be helpful.

How many weeks or days have I spent here? Have lost track of time – not that it really maters.

My eyes are closed. Two doctors and a woman stop at my bed. I pretend to be asleep. They speak in Swedish. I understand a little now. One of them wonders whether it is true that I am catatonic. She heard that I stare for days out the window and do not talk. They exchange ideas how to reach me. It is true that I remain silent. Unless a specific question is directed to me I don't talk. I don't trust people. Can't make contact with the living world. I have not surfaced yet from the days of my shattered life, which were stripped of everything human and normal.

I feel safe in my cocoon of silence.

My being here is almost a miracle. One day I overhead two young interns discussing my case. This is what happened. My skeleton like body was found in an abandoned barrack in Bergen-Belsen by the liberating English unit. There were no survivors in that particular barrack. The soldiers were removing the corpses piling them onto large trucks. One soldier happened to notice that I was still warm. He pulled me out from under the heap of dead bodies. Someone rushed me to a German hospital but nobody wanted to treat me there. A fear of typhoid made them dump me on the street where I was found by some British soldiers. I was taken to a make-shift hospital set up by the Liberators. A couple of doctors saved no effort to keep me alive. One of them, a Captain who gave me his blood (twice) and saw to it that I receive cautious treatment. He saved my life!! All this I did not know.

I have no recollection of how I came to be in the transport to Sweden – I was told that I arrived on a stretcher on a hospital-boat organized by the Red Cross.

So here I am, in a clean, comfortable bed, nursed by kind people. Maybe they will succeed in restoring my physical health, but how about the mental wounds? Will they ever heal? What if the scars remain? Actually, I don't really want to live. I fought desperately to survive, too hard, too long. And what for? Years of struggle, motivated by an instinct of self preservation. What force drove me to withstand the most brutal physical and mental punishment? Questions are asked (by well meaning people): "What happed to you during the war?" I have no use for small talk. What is there to say in a sentence or two? No one in his sane mind would ever believe the bestiality, cruelty and depravation one was subjected to. When a person is totally dehumanized,

defiled, stripped of all dignity, herded, enslaved, terrorized and brutalized – mere words are inadequate. So why tell? To see a puzzled look of disbelief? That hurts, oh it hurts.

In spite of the thoughtful, good care we get here, there are many instances that indicate the personnel's disgust with us. It is our behavior. The orderlies can not understand our need to hoard and hide food. They think of us as savages because we devour our food like hungry beasts, ask for more and get ill afterwards.

I too have some bread and cookies hidden under my mattress. They will be found in the morning, when the beds are made. They will be disposed of in spite of our pleading and protestations. The young nurses' aids look at us in disbelief. They don't know of years of hunger and deprivation.

Tonight I will find a new hiding place for the bread. There are about 200 of us to feed. Who knows, maybe food will become scarce here.

Cautiously I am taking in the most unbelievable generosity of the staff. They give us clean, white sheets, blankets and soft pillows. Plenty of food three times a day. The luxury of a bathroom, flushing toilets, things we were deprived off for five years. It must be a dream – it has to be. I am afraid to wake up – all these wonderful amenities will disappear.

If I could only have the assurance that I will not be cold and hungry again. Maybe I would have the will to get better and break that silence. But why should I try to get better? There is nothing and no one for me. I am alone in the world. Have no family, no health, no money and no strength left. I feel old and worn out. I have fought for a long time – feel drained. Who will give me the strength and moral support to face the future? Where are my parents and sister? As the present situation is, I can't even face the nights – the nightmares, the terror of dreams. They are always repetitious: I witness people being shot and dumped into pits. I am next – my turn. I start running away, am chased by the S.S. and their dogs. I reach a dead end; a huge grey wall blocks my path. My pursuers are about to overtake me, are getting closer and closer-----I am terrified, paralyzed with fear. I wake up drenched in perspiration.

Only when the sun shines and I am wrapped in a blanket do I feel safe and warm. Somehow it gives me a feeling of security and looking at "my lake" and watching the tranquil sailboats drifting in the gentle breeze makes me feel good. Maybe the day will come, who knows, maybe I will talk again.

As the days pass and I am getting stronger, memories keep on coming back. Recollections are surfacing, sharp and clear. I hear conversations, see faces, situations, a vivid replay of the past. So many strange things happened. It is crowding me, getting burdensome – will have to open up and let it out. I ask for a notebook and pencil. Where and when did it all begin?

POLAND – DROHOBYCZ 1941

June 6th – my birthday – I am 16 years old. Yes old. Where did my youth go? Seems like ages ago since I was a happy, carefree little girl.

The heat is oppressive in my dark little room. It is unusually hot for June. I look down at my hands. I am holding my mother's beautiful diamond ring and a matching bracelet. The last two pieces of her treasured jewels – last tie to her former life. She gave them to me this evening, "Sew them into the hem of your jacket, hold onto these pieces. You never know when you will have to use them in emergencies or we may have to exchange them for food." She looked at the jewelry sadly and said, "Your father bought them for me when we lived in Vienna – we were newly married. Yes, those were lovely days."

After she left, I started thinking about our life. It seems like a long time ago, when we lived in a beautiful home, filled with objects of art, fine furniture, rich carpets; servants to wait on us.

Political events changed our life. September 1st (or 3rd) 1939 Germany invaded Poland. Not encountering much resistance, they moved from cities to towns, reaching us on September 11th. An official order was issued to provide military personnel with lodging. Part of our six room apartment was taken over. An officer and his orderly moved in. They were polite and happy to have found a civilized German speaking family. (My mother was from Düsseldorf, father from Vienna, so German was the language spoken in our house). They enjoyed Mother's piano playing and brought us food and delicacies. This agreeable situation lasted all of two weeks. They bid us a courteous farewell and withdrew from our city.

September 24th the Russian Army enters our city.

Our house is taken over by Russian officers. Our oil wells are nationalized, banks closed. In no time everything is taken away; our wealth, position, safety and security. "Down with Capitalism – death to the Capitalists" is their motto. That means us. Each night brings with it new terror. People disappear. We sleep fully clothed, little bags packed. Night raids take place. Homes are broken into and people dragged off at the point of bayonets, transported to Siberia. Alert to every sound from outside, we huddle together anticipating the worst. Will we be next? A constant fear, what to do, where to go? My parents, being "Capitalists", are sure to be deported – it will be just a matter of time. They have to hide. Fortunately, a former employee of ours has a summer cottage outside the city. It is there that my parents and sister hide. I, as a student, remain in the city. Initially, I live with some less affluent relatives and then with friends. I have to continue my schooling and adapt to a difficult, new daily schedule. 5 a.m. – stand in line to obtain my rationed food. 6 a.m. – report to work. I am lucky to find work in a salt mine office as an Assistant Statistician (I draw on my experience, having spent part of my vacation in my father's office compiling data of daily oil production). The work force at the salt mines is comprised of 120 "law offenders" sentenced to forced labor. They are a rough, vulgar assortment of shady types – not exactly a suitable ambiance for a frightened young girl. However, they don't bother me. I eat my noon meal with them and occasionally they give me a lump of sugar, a piece of bacon or a chunk of bread. I hoard these goodies to take them to my family when I visit them. I work from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., go to school from 4 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.,

study at night and am up again at 4 a.m. A rough schedule, but my dual activities provide me with two ID cards, increasing my food allowance. I put aside part of my meager provision for my parents and sister. Almost overnight I become the "solo" provider for my family. My father's ulcer flares up, also his angina attacks become more frequent. My mother and sister are afraid of the Russian soldiers. Due to the abnormal circumstances, I undertake the responsibility to provide for my family. Nothing has prepared me for this task. In my youthful ignorance I become bold and take risks. I sell people's possessions on the black-market. Clothes, jewelry, paintings, anything in exchange for food. If caught in this kind of barter I can be jailed or deported. However, there is no time for rational thinking - only one goal - obtain food for my family. They are totally unaware of by what means I am able to bring them sugar, lard, tea or rice.

We are separated for six months. I miss them a lot. I am tired of being grown up. One day I come up with an ingenious plan. I remember that my father was very well liked by our former workers. He treated them well, and since they are in power now, I seek their help. With their signature and petition we get my father back. Oil is in great demand. My father's expertise in the oil drilling field is now needed. He resumes work as a technical supervisor. We are reunited. We are allotted very humble, small quarters – no electricity or running water. We use kerosene lamps and I (the strong one) have to fetch pails of water from a pump, a far cry from our former life style. I continue my dual schedule – school and work – and we settle into a routine.

Two years of Russian occupation end abruptly. On June 22nd, war breaks out between Russia and Germany. On July 1st, the German Army re-enters Drohobycz again. In no time it becomes apparent that our lives are in danger. Daily decrees posted on buildings inform us about new deprivations. No school for Jews, no shopping, a curfew, zoning, armbands with a Star of David, no privileges. Food rations are given only to working people who can prove their work essential. We hear rumors that people are being sent to forced labor camps. We are terrified; how are we going to manage now? How does one go about finding work?

One day I happen to meet a former classmate. I tell him of my desperate search for work. I need an "Arbeitskarte" (work ID). He mentions two names: Papuschek and Lindner (a German and an Austrian) – two civilians who are managers of a slaughterhouse (specializing in making sausages) and a food warehouse. They are the food purveyors to the occupying German Army. My friend tells me that the two men are unusually decent people, even helpful to the Jews; supposedly some old men and children have been hidden by them.

Well, I think I will give it a try. In my mother's "grown-up clothes", some make-up and my braids in a bun, I go for an "interview". After a few preliminary questions, Mr. Papuschek asks where I learned to speak such fluent German. I explain that my Mom was from Düsseldorf and my Dad studied in Austria, so I always speak German at home. My Polish and Russian do not impress him. He looks at me kindly and says, "I am sorry, I do not know what to do with you." I start crying, between sobs I tell him that I can learn, that I can do any house chores, cook (a lie) and do office work. I guess I wore him out. He and his partner Mr. Lidner agree to hire me. Initially I am to "garden" a small plot of earth in front of his house. After a few days of pulling out weeds, my visibility becomes too conspicuous and I am told to do some house-cleaning. Their steady maid, a pretty Polish woman, Maria dislikes me from the first day on. On her day

off – Saturday and Sunday – I am summoned to make the bosses meals. Breakfast and lunch are uneventful but dinner is a humiliating catastrophe. My dumplings are hard as a rock, suitable for a game of pool. Fortunately I am not punished, only demoted. It eventually becomes obvious that Maria hates me. She is jealous of my fluent German, although with her I speak fluent Polish. Mr. Papuschek and Lindner agree to let me work in their office, doing simple billing, filing, writing memos, making telephone calls, etc.

Enough thinking about all the recent events. How many hours have gone by?" I am still sitting at the window, it is 4 o'clock in the morning. No sense going to sleep now. I am restless, have a feeling of foreboding. I sit on my bed shivering with apprehension. I am scared and so very tired. Tired of being strong, tired of acting grown-up, tired of being always hungry. I wish I could cry. Instead, I have to pull myself together and face another day. My parents and sister are still asleep when I leave the house. The early morning air clears my head. But it is not a nice day. Dark clouds hang low and heavy.

The office is very quiet. I can not concentrate on my work. Suddenly there is a great commotion outside. Shrill whistles, screaming, cars coming to a screeching halt, shots being fired. I rush to the window and stare bewildered at the scene below. People are running wildly in all directions. The streets are filled with policemen, cars, uniformed Germans and fleeing Jews. My boss enters swiftly and pulls me away from the window. He takes me to his private office. In a tense voice he informs me that I may not leave the room. An "Aktion" is taking place – Jews are rounded up for deportation. "Where are they being taken to?" I ask. Without answering me, he leaves, locking the door. I remain there against my will, thinking frantically about what is happening. Are my people safe? Is my family together? Did they leave the house? Will they be alright? I hear shouts and screams from the street. I am frantic with fear. Hours pass. I sit huddled in the corner, waiting. After a while the outside noisy activities cease. I am permitted to leave the office, to check on my family. The sight in the street is sickening. Scattered belongings, bloody bodies in the gutter, blood everywhere.

I run wildly towards my house. The closer I get, the slower my step. The gate is wide open, Wheel marks on the ground. The front door is ajar. I enter cautiously. The room is in disorder. On the table are dishes and scattered cutlery and bits of food. No one is in sight. There is no answer to my shrill call, "Mutti, Papa, Erna, where are you?" Our meager possessions are gone, the furniture smashed. The terrible truth dawns on me. They are gone. They have been taken away, but where to?

Once more I walk through the rooms, the kitchen, looking for some sign or clue. Only this morning there were four of us. They are gone. I am alone. Why didn't I stay home today? I had that strange fear last night as though I had an inkling of something bad about to happen.

I sit on the front steps. It starts raining. After a while, wet and chilled, I go back inside. The silence engulfs me. I cry out, trying to reach beyond it - for a sound - hope. My choked sobs echo in the silence. I am afraid. I want to push it away – beat against it. Memories of the past day, what we said to each other, what we did. I feel for the ring and bracelet in my jacket seam. Did my Mom expect something to happen? Why did she give me the two pieces, why not the ring to me and the bracelet to my sister? I cry and cry until exhausted I slump to the floor. For a

few moments I sit on the floor dazed – thinking and now what? Where can I go? I have to see my boss, maybe he can help me find my family.

I look around the room, trying to remember the location of our "safe". Behind the nightstand is a loose board in the floor. Hidden in that space are few small items: my sister's earrings with tiny rubies, my father's gold cufflinks and tie clip, and a chain from a pocket watch, a few coins. I take the little bag and put it in my panties. Under my bed I find a small canvas box containing some of my clothes and underwear. I pack up my few belongings and as I head towards the door I see my mother's sweater hanging on the hook. I wrap myself in it, clutching and feeling it --- I leave the house. The street is empty, it is early. I reach the office. Drop my belongings under my desk. Wash my face with cold water. Open the window. It is a beautiful morning. Against a brilliant blue sky, tiny fleecy clouds move above the treetops. Birds are circling high above. Overnight the streets were washed, everything looks clean and normal. Did these horrible events really happen yesterday? What am I doing here at the window? I should be looking for my parents and sister. But where? When my boss arrives, I plead with him to help me find my family. He makes a telephone call. While talking, he looks at me strangely. With a sad voice he says, "You can't join them, they are gone. If you need something let me know. He leaves the office.

I contact the same distant relatives who took me in during the Russian occupation. I stay with them for a few days, but they have to move on, someplace safer. Some non-Jewish friends agree to shelter me for a while. So, like the "Wandering Jew", I drag myself from place to place with my few meager possessions. I resume working; days pass; life continues. I am numb, perform my chores like a robot, try not to think what next. A few days later Mr. Lindner tells me that Maria (their maid) talks too much about me to some people who alerted him. An acquaintance of Mr. Lindner who is a member of the "Wiener Schutzpolizei" suggests I become "invisible" for the next few days. A search (for me) in the office and home is imminent. Where shall I hide? What am I going to do? I see no solution, there is no escape. I tell my boss that I am giving up, he replies "No way, there is always time for that. Your parents would want you to try to save yourself. I will try to help you." Before I go into hiding, I hand over to him my mother's ring and bracelet.

I contact my Aunt and Uncle, who live in Krakow as non-Jews. We agree to meet in 3 days. My sister's earrings and father's gold cufflinks and clip buy me false Aryan papers. I am now Katarzyna Helena Winnicka. I prepare to leave. Mr. Lindner, a good-natured old man gives me his ¾ length leather coat, a blue pullover, a watch, scarf and a pair of high, brown leather boots. Papuscheck supplies me with a small suitcase filled with clothes, the origin of which I can guess. It is time to leave. He drives me to the station. We pass sentries along the way. The car has an official sticker and we proceed smoothly. In the dim light I see his face, covered with perspiration. It dawns on me then, what risk he took driving me. Tearfully, I say, "How can I thank you?" "No, my child" he replies. "From now on you have to be very brave. If you need something let me know. You might not realize that the ring and bracelet you gave me are very valuable. I had them appraised, they are worth a lot of money. I will keep part of it for you, but now you have to go." I don't want to leave the car, am afraid. He literally pushes me out and drives off.

The little station is deserted. The sleepy looking ticket seller hands me my ticket. I am so scared. Finally the train arrives, very few civilians get on. I board and my journey to Krakow begins. I stand at the window, pressing my forehead against the cool glass. It seems as though the rhythmical sound of the wheels are saying, "What now, what now, what now?" The train stops in Bochnia. I see three uniformed Germans getting on board. Over the loudspeaker comes an announcement, "Have your papers ready for inspection." I panic. Suddenly the door opens to my compartment. A young conductor says "A lady in the next compartment wants to see you" What am I to do? He motions to follow him. Can I trust him? Where is he taking me, to the policeman? He turns sidewise and whispers, "Trust me". Trying not to betray my great fear, I follow him. After passing several occupied compartments, he shows me into a first class cabin. "Shh-be quiet, I am the nephew of your former neighbor. I used to vacation in Drohobycz. I remember you." He places a sign outside the door, "Not in Use", locks me in and leaves in a hurry. I hear voices; the train makes stops; time passes. I wonder what happened to my suitcase. Fortunately, I have Mr. Lindner's coat on – idly I put my hand in the pocket, find money and a small, smooth object. In the passing light I see a lapel pin with a swastika on it. Time passes. I worry about the curfew. We arrive in Krakow. My savior, carrying my suitcase, helps me off the train. He is finished with his run. He takes me through a side exit, "For Personnel Only", and we are on the street. Upon hearing that I have no definite place to stay, he takes me to a nearby, small inn, where transient people can be accepted "without problems". I thank him warmly. He will not divulge his name and leaves.

After paying in advance, I am shown "my place"... a dirty cot behind a filthy curtain, in a large room subdivided into numerous open cubicles. I see some of my co-lodgers and I feel sick. They look like underworld characters and streetwalkers – men and women all in one room. The air is fetid, a lot of bawdy noises around me. How can I possibly stay here? Where shall I go? It is curfew. Fully dressed, I sit on a chair holding on to my suitcase. Finally, my companions "retire for the night." I cry silently, thinking of my situation. I am alone in this hostile world. My life is in danger. How am I to survive? Exhaustion overwhelms me and at long last I doze off. When I wake up, I am on the floor sitting on top of my suitcase. I don't know how it happened. Daylight shows me the ugliness of my horrible, smelly surroundings. Some snore, some cough, a couple smoke. I don't stop to wash. Without making any noise, I leave stealthily. The air feels good outside. What am I to do? I need a place to stay for one more night before meeting my aunt. There is a little coffee shop nearby. I use the toilet, wash my face, comb my hair. The problem is - when renting a room one has to register with the police – something I have to avoid. After hours of walking and looking, I am lucky to find a tiny, clean room – no questions asked. After a good night sleep, I set out to meet my aunt and uncle at the agreed place. As I approach, I see four police cars and a cordon of Germans enclosing the square. Obviously a round-up. I duck into an alley and proceed quickly into the opposite direction. What am I to do now? What happened to my relatives? A couple of hours later, my call to their apartment remains unanswered. My repeated calls are to no avail. I can imagine what happened. I am troubled by the thought that I might have contributed to a possible disaster. If I had not come, if I had not gotten in touch with them ---- A painful reminder of my parents disappearance. I return to the place I left in the morning explaining that my aunt was delayed due to some unforeseen circumstances and will be arriving tomorrow. "May I please stay one more night?"

Reluctantly, she agrees with a stipulation – should her son return earlier than expected, I will have to sleep on a sofa in her room. There is a little basin and a pitcher. I fetch a pail of hot water and start from the top. While I crouch over the pail washing my lower region, the door opens and my landlady enters. Perceiving my position, she starts shrieking, "What are you doing? Peeing?" "No Mrs. Kozlowski," I reply, "I am washing myself." To which she replies, "Only whores and Jewish women wash between their legs. And since you don't look like a prostitute, you must be Jewish." Before I have a chance to reply she leaves the room. Dripping wet, I stand there petrified. What will she do? Call the police? I dress and undress – If I leave, where will I go? It is past curfew. Have to act naturally. I go to bed, but can't sleep. Hours pass. Suddenly I hear some agitated voices – hers and a man's. Most of their argument escapes me, but from the few words I hear, it is their plan to blackmail me first and then inform the police. He berates her for not checking my papers. After a while I hear his raised voice, "I am going upstairs, will sleep at Janina's. Your stupidity will get us in trouble." I hear a slamming door, followed by silence. It is 11:45 now. I have to act. I must leave, dress quietly. There is a window in my room facing the back of the house. Fortunately it is on the street level. Inch by inch I raise the window carefully not to make any noise. My heart beats wildly. I am shaking with fear, but I must leave. My little bag is already outside, now I have to follow. I am not exactly agile, but I have to move quickly. I hurt my elbow, bang my head, scrape my left hand, but I am out. Hope I didn't make too much noise – looks like I am undetected. Now what? I see a gate leading to the street. Don't know in which direction to head. A clock strikes 12 midnight. I walk away from the house. Suddenly, I hear from afar marching steps – must be the night patrol. Oh, God, is this the end? I have a sudden wild idea. In my coat pocket is the swastika pin Mr. Lindner gave me. I stick it into my leather coat's lapel. I approach the startled patrol confidently, with my arm raised and a loud "Heil Hitler". They are bewildered by my sudden appearance. I tell them, in German of course, that having a good time at a party made me loose track of time. I missed my train already, but if I wait at the station there is another one early in the morning. It doesn't pay to go to sleep anymore. I continue chatting. One of the soldiers offers to get me transportation, but laughingly I say, "The cool air and a brisk walk will clear my head. I don't mind the long walk." He offers to accompany me, places a call to secure a replacement for himself and we are on our way.

During our walk he carries my bag. I tell him about being just newly married. My husband volunteered and wants to fight for our beloved Fatherland and our leader. He tells me about himself and within half an hour we reach the station. I thank him profusely. We exchange "Heil Hitler" and he leaves. I find a bench and collapse. I cry and shake. Relief or fear? How did I have the guts to carry off such a situation? Will the son of my landlady inform the police about my escape? I hope he won't. He might get his mother into trouble. Thoughts race through my tired head. The story I told my "companion" was not my original, ingenious fabrication. It was a discussion I overheard between Papuschek and Linder. "With her Goethe, Schiller and Wagner background, it should be more plausible to pretend to be German than Aryan Polish!!" It was just an idea of their toying with different scenarios – "Should she be married? Where is she from? Who and where is a possible husband?" It was all vague at the time. I don't know how it surfaced now, and how I was able to formulate a coherent story. Now, I have to calm down and plan my next step. One thing is sure, I can't go on any longer. At daybreak I call my ex-boss and in a coded manner inform him, I am coming back. He suggests that I call back in the evening and do nothing until then. I am exhausted and can't stay at the station indefinitely

without drawing attention to myself. That means back to the city and the danger of being recognized and caught. What shall I do?

One thing is clear, I have to avoid walking the streets. I stop to have breakfast, have not eaten since the day before. There is a newspaper someone left at my table. I scan the pages for art galleries, museum, movies – to spend a few hours unnoticed. I find a refuge in a Panoptikum – a dark room showing travel slides from far away exotic countries. I sit there for a very long time, the same scenes moving in front of my tired eyes. I am dead tired. Would love to close my eyes but am afraid to fall asleep. I leave for an art gallery. Four hours pass. I am biding my time. I wonder how long before my nerves will give away. Finally I place a call at the arranged hour. My instructions are to proceed to a certain place. It is outside of Krakow, near a village Gorlica Duchowna. I can stay there and someone will have something for me the next day. It sounds cryptic, but under the circumstances understandable. There is no public transportation to get to the assigned place, but after paying an exorbitant price I get there by horse and buggy. My finances are dwindling - an additional concern. I am greeted by an elderly woman. She says little, but offers me a sandwich and a glass of tea. I can stay overnight. Her nephew will meet me the next day. For the first time in three days, I can change my clothes, wash up and sleep, hoping that no one will be looking for me in this remote place. I sleep, but wake ever so often scared, listening to sounds, apprehensive. How much does the woman know? Who is that nephew? He finally arrives at mid-day. No introduction. He suggests a walk. He sees my reluctance. I have not choice but to follow him. A few steps away from the house is a bench. He hands me a fat envelope and says, "All you need is here. Follow all instructions. In a while I will take you back to Krakow. Be ready to leave in an hour. You need that time to read what I brought you." I go back to the house. His aunt Pani Gosia is dozing in a rocking chair. I spread the contents of the envelope on my bed. A new ID (with a picture of mine from Drohobycz ration card), a document from the Department of Labor and a letter of introduction to his friend from Papuschek. I am now a 'Volkdeutsche' (People of German descent not born in Germany proper. Many of them live in a part of Poland – Silesia and near Gdansk – that formerly belonged to Germany. They were thought of as being German). I have been newly married to a young man (Dieter) fighting at the Front. My name is Elizabeth Helene Von Stumpart. In the letter to me is an address and name which sounds familiar. I remember that my boss used to send her many parcels with salamis, sausages and meat. When I once asked Mr. Lindner whether she was family, he said, "Oh no, she is Papuschek's, a former girlfriend, he still has not forgotten. She left him to marry an older, rich Nazi." In the letter to me is also a coded note and a substantial amount of money. Gisela's (my mother) robe (ring) was exchanged for a new blouse (new I.D.) but there is plenty of credit left (money left) for more purchases, since the "robe" was very costly. "Enjoy the new blouse." I keep on reading and rereading everything to memorize it all.

The nephew picks me up. I thank Mrs. Gosia for her hospitality and present her with a few pieces of my "assorted" clothing. We leave the humble little village. Before we part company he asks me whether I have disposed of my "other" papers; which I have forgotten to do. He burns them, wishes me luck and leaves me.

I stand on the street with my little suitcase. I am scared out of my wits. How am I going to handle this new situation?

I arrive at Ilse and Karl Geisler's place. They were obviously alerted about my arrival. She is quite animated and talkative. I find out (from her) that I am going to stay with them for a while, until I hear from my husband as to where I should proceed. It seems an elaborate story about me was told. I am welcome. "My" room is very nice. Hitler's picture is over my bed. Ilse is delighted to have me as company since Karl is a very busy man, almost never at home, and she is lonely.

Thus starts my new life as a German. Ilse makes plans to introduce me to their friends. I have to join the social circle. There is much to do, also volunteering. She laughs off my pleading to leave me alone. "I am not good company, am traumatized by the separation from my new husband, and have some problems socializing." To all this she says, "Nonsense ("guatsch"). You are young. We will keep you busy.

A couple of days pass. I am unable to sleep. Thoughts and emotions race through my tired mind; fear, hate, moral misgivings gnaw. How can I face another day amongst those people? The strain of having to be alert every moment, to perceive any danger from a misstep of mine.

Ilse includes me in her daily schedule without reservation. I hardly glimpse her husband. He leaves early and returns late. He has something to do with banking and finances. I can hardly keep up with the names and faces I am meeting.

Ilse asks me to pick up a book for her. She claims I spend too much time indoors brooding. It is quite a walk. I am scared, but can't refuse. I am about to leave the bookstore when a young S.S. man stops me. My knees buckle. A lightening thought – "This is it" I hear a "Hello! Hello, don't you remember me? Ilse introduced us at Hedwig's." I smile and extend my hand. Of course, forgive me." He offers me a ride home. We drive off. As he makes a turn, we encounter a group of Jews working on the street. He drives straight into them, knocking an old man down. Horrified, I yell at Gunther, "What are you doing? Stop!" He does. Upon seeing a German officer, the terror stricken Jews resumes their work. I look at the bleeding, old man lying on the street. I turn to Gunther saying, "He is bleeding. He is hurt. He needs help." The old man stares and mumbles "warum?" (why?). A shot is fired. "Now he won't need any help," says Gunther calmly blowing at his gun. He pushes me back into the car. I am shaken. "Have you calmed down sufficiently to have lunch with me?" I can hardly reply when he proceeds, "You seem upset about the little incident. Why should you care about an old Jew?" The sarcasm and insinuation is almost palpable. My thoughts race, what do I reply without giving myself away? I attempt a smile and say, "I really don't care what happens to them, but the sight of blood makes me queasy, even my own," I quip. "Let's forget it and have that coffee you offered before." During lunch Gunther looks at me strangely, speculatively. I can't eat, my insides are churning. To divert him, I talk about the book I just picked up and ask his opinion about some art exhibit. He takes me "home". I have a strong urge to spit in his face and scream murderer. Instead I say, "Thanks for the coffee," and "auf Wiedersehen."

When I reach my room I collapse – shaking and crying. "God why? Why am I going through with it?

Next day, as I help Ilse with some of her volunteering job, she asks me if I would mind being left alone in the apartment. Her husband is away for three days on business. She wants to visit a friend. The way she says it, I understand, it is not to be mentioned. All I say is, "I hope you have a wonderful time." This situation gives me an opportunity to formulate an idea. What would happen if I am caught and don't come back? Would they be in trouble – and my ex-boss? I spend some time thinking of a plausible scenario. That evening as she comes to my room to say goodbye, she says, "Don't you go away. I like having you here." This is a perfect opening. "You know Ilse, I am here just for a few days. As soon as I get word when and where I can meet my husband, I will take off like lightening. I won't be able to say where I am going. There is some hush-hush aspect to it that I am not supposed to discuss. Please don't ask and do not even mention it to Karl." She embraces me and says, "Now both of us have secrets." Long after she leaves, I stay awake. What prompted me to say what I told her? Is it a premonition of an imminent disaster?

The cleaning woman was given two days off. I am luxuriating in the stillness and the safety of the apartment. As I drink my breakfast coffee I scan the local paper. An add catches my attention. An elderly lady, visually impaired, needs a German speaking young companion, preferably as soon as possible. If I can only get that position I might be saved. I call and find out that a short train ride will get me there. The lady is eager. To oblige, I agree to come over immediately – she knows the train schedule. With great trepidation I set out to meet Mrs. Friedrich.

As the train pulls away from the station, a uniformed man enters the compartment. There are three of us: a man whose face I can't see behind a newspaper, the German and I. My book slides off my knee. The officer and I bend down simultaneously butting heads.

"Ouch!" He laughs, apologizes and a conversation begins. He needs to have a clear head to carry out his important assignment. Politely I inquire what that might be and say jokingly, "A rendezvous with a beautiful girl". Oh no, I wish it would be," he replies. "I am in charge of the Jewish liquidation program." Gory details follow. He gloats about the efficiency of the operation. In the course of his little speech, our 3rd companion shifts constantly behind his newspaper. The train stops – there is a delay – we have to wait for 15 minutes. The man gets up, changes his mind; sits down again. His erratic movements betray his nervousness. I can guess who he is. I disregard my own safety, thinking how to divert the German. So I proceed to discuss the book I am holding. But to no avail. The Aryan "hero" pounces on his prey. "Would you please step out" he says to the man. He closes the door to the compartment as they stand outside talking. After a few minutes, he pushes the man off the train. I hear a shrill whistle and running. I look out just in time to see the man being beaten and led away. Proudly, the German returns to the compartment. To my question about all the commotion he answers, "No matter how clever the Jews think they are, their disguise can't fool me. No Jew can escape my trained eye." I express my admiration for his expertise and ask him innocently, "How can you tell someone is Jewish?" He shrugs his shoulder and says, "Just looking at their eyes and I can sure smell them". I smile brightly and say, "How very clever of you. What can you see in my dark eyes, a Jewess? What can you smell besides my 4711 Cologne"? He thinks me very witty. I manage to remain calm and continue an innocuous conversation. My stomach feels crampy. My

palms are sweaty. I do not know what prompted me to challenge this beast. I am playing a dangerous game. How much longer can I do it?

An announcement over the loudspeaker informs us that our train will have to be rerouted, we have to get off. The next train is due in 3 hours and 45 minutes. The German officer leaves – he will have a car pick him up. I am very upset not to be able to keep my interview. With the delays and erratic schedule, I can't be back before curfew. Luckily I am able to obtain a seat on the train going back to Krakow and reach "home" safely. I call Mrs. Friedrich explaining what happened. She sounds nice. A friend's daughter will stay with her three days. I should call to make a new date.

Ilse returns the next day. She is in a pensive mood. In the course of our chat, she quotes a German quote – to the effect "if the word 'if' would not exist" our lives would be simpler, less mistakes, less regrets. I gather she refers to herself. I wait and she pours her heart out. She left her great love to marry Karl. It is his second marriage. There is a son she dislikes; he is in the Hitler youth away for a month. It is the son's room I am occupying. That explains Hitler's photo over my bed. Ilse is not happy with Karl, has occasional flings, but still loves Papuscheck. "Do you know him well? She asks me. "No, not at all. We have mutual acquaintances," I replied. Later on I keep on wondering about her confession and all the personal disclosure. We spend the evening playing cards and dominos.

Early the next morning, Ilse burst into my room. She waves a white envelope at me excited about the invitation to attend a soiree given by the Deputy of Governor Frank. It is an honor to be included amongst the few chosen civilians and high-ranking officers of the S.S., the Gestapo and Army. Karl will try to obtain permission to bring me along. I interrupt her "No, please tell Karl not to. Although it would be an honor to be amongst such illustrious dignitaries, I prefer not to go." "Why?" she asks. "Ilse" I say, "don't you see it is not proper for me to go to parties while my husband is away. Besides, I am shy, have no evening clothes and am not in the mood." My excuses fall on deaf ears. She ignores my reasons. Karl calls at noon – "permission granted". I am horrified. How can I face murderers of my people? I have no strength. I have not recouped yet from the train episode. Frantically I am thinking of a way out. Ilse rushes me upstairs. She bribes the dressmaker to alter an evening gown to fit me. Fortunately no major alterations are necessary. Ilse flutters around in animated preparations, choosing clothes, accessories, making beauty parlor appointments for both of us. I go through the motions like a zombie. I plead with Ilse. "I have not shoes, gloves or evening bag." She gets annoyed but comes through with everything including pink sating slippers (mules). We have to cut off the feathery puffs and use rubber bands. The fateful evening arrives, nervous last minute preparations - It is 8 p.m. I stand in front of a full length mirror in a silver grey lace gown (hiding the pink slippers). My face is made up. My hair is in a fancy coiffure. Can this superficial transformation hide a terrified, unhappy, shaky 16 year old? How will I be able to handle the situation? What am I going to talk about? How should I behave when faced with a room full of murderers? I don't want to go. I am scared. Tears run down my face, streaking my makeup. Karl and Ilse stand in the door, looking at me strangely. They are puzzled. Lamely I explain, "I have never been to a party. I am shy. I miss my husband." They hug me. Ilse in her blue taffeta dress, Karl resplendid in a tuxedo with numerous decorations and I leave the house. A big black car takes us to the party.

We arrive at the festively lit Officers Club. A uniformed official ushers us in. My heart is pounding. I am having difficulty breathing. My knees shake. People stop Karl. I am being introduced. Champagne is served. I decline, my hands tremble too much to hold a glass. I trail after Ilse and Karl, who are circulating. Finally we sit down to a magnificently served dinner. Sure doesn't look like war-time-food. There are six of us at the table. I am seated between Ilse and an elderly Major. Karl, a buxom blond and a young S.S. officer complete our table. A small band is playing. A few people are dancing. "My" Major is drinking quite a lot, keeps on patting my hand and knee. Ever so often the music stops. Toasts are made to the Führer, to the Reich, to the Governor, and our heroic soldiers. If I wasn't so terrified, I would laugh, it is too ludicrous.

It is relatively quiet in the room while dinner is served. I hear swatches of conversations between the young S.S. officer and Karl. "We are creating a camp in Plaszow to hold the Jews deported from Krakow and other cities. However, we are faced with a dilemma. The Gestapo in charge of the Krakow Jews and the S.S. in charge of Plaszow don't see eye to eye. Thus we see some animosity, especially between Kunde and his opponent." "I hear Kunde won't be here tonight. He was summoned by the Big One… wonder whether Willie will make an appearance."

I try to make sense of what I overhear. The names mean nothing to me. I have to pay attention to the old Major, he urges me to eat. I push my food around the plate – can't swallow. Just looking around at the faces of these murderers is enough to make me gag. I take a few sips of wine. There is a sudden commotion; a latecomer arrives. Many people stand up to greet him to embrace him. He seems to enjoy all that attention. He is tall and looks good in his impeccable uniform. He took a seat at the table across from us. The young S.S. officer at our table says laughingly, "It is typical of Willie to make a grand entrance. After all, he is a big shot in the Gestapo – he is instrumental in carrying out the local Jewish solution." I stare. I see an animated face. I think of the power that man has – life or death. I just keep on looking at him. The intensity of my stare is apparently misunderstood. With an arrogant smirk he approaches our table, bows to the Major and asks me to dance. I freeze, can't stand up. Ilse kicks me. I follow him to the dance floor where we remain for two consecutive dances. He is aloof but compliments me on my dancing. I am silent. He says, "Are you shy or in awe of me"? The irony of it makes me reply, "Why should I be?" He looks piqued, so I say, "Judging by the reception and accolades – you must be a very important person." He nods and retorts curtly, "Yes, I am". The music stops. He brings me back to the table. The situation is just too bizarre. Here I am amongst people I hate, despise and fear. I feel like screaming with rage – but I remain seated with a false smile on my face – AN IMPOSTOR.

My tablemate, the old Major, asks me to dance. He is tipsy but manages to waltz me around. Fortunately, dinner is over. A few more speeches follow and we leave. Ilse doesn't stop chattering about the wonderful evening. I thank her and Karl for taking me along and giving me an opportunity to experience such a "memorable" event. As soon as we reach "home", I excuse myself and collapse on my bed. I am exhausted from the effort and strain of the past few hours. My nerves can not take this existence, I am tired of this charade, so terribly tired of having to watch every word, every step. I am beginning to loath myself. Why do I want to live under such circumstances? How much longer can I endure the stress of wearing an outer shell that conceals my inner self? This camouflage is wearing thin. I go to bed, can not sleep. I am reliving the

whole evening. Little do I know that this evening will be my last one as a free person. No foreboding.

I toss and turn, am much too nervous to sleep. I have to make a decision how to go on. I see the futility of my deception. I am afraid that my "impostor" days are numbered. I have to move on. Plans, ideas whirl through my tired head. By daybreak I have a plan. I remember Mrs. Friedrich. At breakfast I mention to Ilse that in our pre-party flurry and excitement, I completely forgot that I was supposed to visit Dieter's aunt in Rzeszow. Luckily, Ilse has plans for the day. After she leaves, I contact Mrs. Friedrich who is eager to meet me. She asks if I am available to come for a 2-3 day trial to see whether we are compatible. I am delighted. The train leaves in 2-1/2 hours. It doesn't take long to pack my few belongings. I leave some clothes for the maid. I write a note to Ilse. I thank her and Karl profusely for their hospitality, kindness and friendship. I say that I found out that Dieter's aunt is not well and wishes to go back to her home in Germany. She might need help and if no one is available, I may have to accompany her. Nothing is definite. I will try to be in touch, don't be concerned if it should take a while, times are not exactly normal. As I close my note with "Your graciousness and friendship made my loneliness easier to bear – I will miss you" – it strikes me that I meant it. Another chapter is closed and now what? I have doubts about whether I am doing the right thing. I am so scared. What if Mrs. Friedrich wants to investigate who she is hiring? What if she is shrewd and suspicious? What will I do if she doesn't like me and doesn't want to hire me? Where will I go? Why am I clinging to this deceitful, dangerous lifestyle? There is no future possible. All these thoughts race through my head, as I leave the house. My heart is heavy – it is here that for a brief time I escaped reality.

As I walk away, I realize I am hungry – still have time to stop for a quick cup of coffee and a roll. The coffee shop is very crowded, better not take a chance. As I look around, I see two men watching me. One looks a bit familiar, don't know where to place his face, but he hides behind a newspaper and out I go. The two men rise and follow. There are people strolling by, busy, happy. I am aware of a brilliant, blue sky, sunshine and a fresh smell of spring. Strange, how acutely one's senses can suddenly perceive all these details.

"Stop!" I hear the command behind me. Pretending it is not directed at me – I continue walking. They quicken their steps and block my way. "Your identification papers, please." Arrogantly I reply in German, "Since when do Polish civilians have the right to accost German citizens? Get out of my way before I call a policeman!" That won't be necessary," one says flashing his badge. "You can stop the charade. I know you from Drohobycz." I realize the futility of further denial. He threatens to handcuff me. I follow quietly.

It is such a beautiful day. Nature is just awakening from the dreary winter. New life starts. And mine? Must it end now? We pass a little flower girl holding a basket of first spring flowers. "Please let me," I say to my captors – and buy a bunch of fragrant flowers – for my own grave? A painful realization hits me – I do want to live so very much. I am so scared, are they going to shoot me? We get into a car. After a short drive we arrive at the Gestapo. We pass through several rooms until we reach a door marked "Criminal Polizei" (Criminal Police). The young man who recognized me from my home town takes my ID papers and disappears into one of the rooms. His partner and I remain seated outside. He chain smokes. I think at least I was not

apprehended in front of Ilse's house. I sure don't want to implicate her – it would then inevitably lead to Papusheck. No matter what, I can not and will not betray him. I am afraid of tortures. Why don't they just shoot me? If I attempt to escape, they will do it, but I am scared.

After a very long wait, I am asked to enter the room. A young officer sits behind a desk. He dismisses the man who brought me in. Thank you for the report. You may leave now Gierczak. I won't need you." We are alone now. Somewhat uncertain he points at the report and asks "Is this accusation true? Who is Mrs. Von Stumpart?" I force a smile. "It is ridiculous. Your young detective is eager for recognition, so he makes a false arrest to prove his ability. Please, I have not time to waste. I continue boldly. I insist on an apology. This is no way to treat a young woman whose husband is at the front fighting for our "Vaterland". Have that fool of a detective account for this most insulting incident."

Ignoring my speech he says, "You will be detained until further investigation. If you are Jewish, you will be dealt with accordingly. In the meantime, steps will be undertaken to establish your identity. He picks up the phone, gives an order. Two policemen push me towards the door, prodding me roughly towards the stairs. Three flights down and before I have a chance to see where we are – a door opens and I am pushed into a dark cell. They slam the heavy door. The key is turned and I am alone. The only light comes from a little square in the door. My eyes can barely make out a shape of a bench and a pail. The air is musty and the smell of urine is repulsive. With arms outstretched I move about. The walls are damp. Something scuttles on the floor – or am I imagining things? A mouse or a rat? I am terrified. I grope my way back to the cold metal door, bang my fists against it and yell, "Please, oh please, let me out!" My calls remain unanswered. The futility of my effort and the danger of my situation hits me. I don't see a way out of this predicament. It has finally caught up with me. So this is the end? Was all that struggle and effort in vain? I don't want to die. There is sunshine, blue sky and a smell of spring outside. I cry, am so scared. What will they do to me? I am tired, hungry, cold and I have to pee. My feet are damp and I am getting a headache. Time passes slowly. Is it still day? I slump on the damp bench. I hear sounds of footsteps. They stop at the door. Shakily I stand up, lean against the cold, damp wall. Light floods my cell. The young German "admitting" officer faces me. With an effort I stand erect and say ironically. "Are you here to apologize for an awful mistake or is this a social visit? Too bad they don't serve here coffee or tea." He lights a cigarette and looks at me. "You may be a skillful actress, but Gierczak's report leads me to believe that you are a Jewess. If that is indeed so, there is only one mitigating way out – I promise to help you. Tell us who supplied you with the German ID papers and you will be out of here. We must get to the source of document forgeries." It strikes me in that moment that a man's life is literally in my hands. To divulge his complicity is unthinkable. To betray a person who helped me? True it was not all altruism. I gave him two priceless pieces of jewelry, but he disregarded the dangerous consequences. He showed humanity, compassion and pity for a young orphaned and helpless girl. I can't do it.

My reply is brief and angry. "Your proposition is simply preposterous. You expect me to admit to something that is not true. I have stated before – it is a mistake and someone will be sorry for it. I shall say no more". Hearing my reply, he angrily leaves the cell, slamming and locking the door. It strikes me that no guard was present.

My bravado takes its toll. I shake and shiver – now what? After what seemed quite a long time, a guard takes me upstairs for interrogation. He says softly, "You better brace yourself girlie, you are in for a rough ride." I am seated in a small room, harsh lights shine straight into my eyes. Two uniformed men face me – one seated at a table typing, the other standing right in front of me. First questions are asked in a friendly tone almost cajoling. I admit nothing. Threats of severe physical harm follow. As I shake my head, the officer facing me, slaps my face with such force that I feel blood in my mouth. This is followed by several blows to my head. I topple of the chair and hit the floor. I bite my lips as vicious kicks hit my back. It hurts terribly; the kicking gets more brutal. I curl up in a fetal position, but am yanked up. I have to lie on my stomach across the chair, arms and feet dangling. The two Gestapo men proceed to beat me with leather straps. Are these shrieks and howling mine? I am told to count each blow but I pass out. Ice cold water is poured on me. I shake my head, the beating continues. I pass out again. A barrage of kicks and blows brings me to. I am in excruciating pain. I can not stand up in spite of their commands and blows. They leave the room. I collapse on the floor. After a while the guard appears and motions me to follow. On my hands and knees I crawl a few paces. He hoists me under my arms and drags me back to a cell – not the same one I was in before. This one has a cot and a tiny window in the ceiling. I ask the guard for a towel or paper to wipe the blood off my face and body. He obliges and gives me also some water. Agonizing pain in my back and my swollen legs and behind prevent me from lying down. I try to rest on my stomach. I realize that this is but the beginning. How can I stand more pain? I am brought some warm soup. I try to swallow some, but the inside of my mouth is sore and swollen and my teeth hurt. Time passes. Sleep is out of the question. A long night lies ahead full of anguish and despair.

The interrogation resumes the following morning. The same two men start the same questions anew. I am only shaking my head which infuriates them. My interrogators devise a new torture. I have to take my blouse off as well as my bra and shoes. When I refuse to take my bra off, a blow to my head makes me obey. Both men light their cigarettes, which they press against my breast, anus, belly and feet. I howl from pain. They repeat the singeing and burning of my flesh. A blissful unconsciousness engulfs me. I am left alone. The guard enters and looks at me sadly. "They are not finished with you," he says. "You better talk." The numerous burn wounds send shooting pain through my body. I shiver and cringe with pain. My torturers return. Mockingly they ask me, "Would you like a cigarette?" I don't answer. "Oh, we have ways to make you talk." Somehow it does not register with me. My eyes close. I feel something cold being attached and an electric shock jolts my body, once – twice. I scream, "Yes, yes I am Jewish! Kill me! Please, oh kill me. Don't torture me anymore!" They laugh and say, "Our little Jewish canary better start singing, otherwise we have some more persuasive methods in store. Start talking right now." "I really and truly don't know the identity of the person who supplied my papers. There was an intermediary. I was approached by a woman in disguise. She wore a wig under a kerchief, big glasses, oversized clothes, her voice was hoarse – could have been a very old or young person. She approached me in the park, it was dusk. She followed me when I got off the train. The station is her look-out for possible clients. She sounded helpful and business like. She named a price I could not meet. She asked a lot of questions about me. Even though I didn't know her, I had to trust her. She made it clear – either she would be paid for helping me or her partner who was trailing us from a distance would alert the police. It was a trap I was caught in. When she heard about my true German background she informed me that luck was on my side. A set of real "Volkdeutsche" papers were available, however at a higher price, I agreed.

If she delivered I could give her my mother's diamond ring. I told her I lost my whole family and begged her not to deceive me. She took my picture in a nearby, lit store and told me to be at the station at 10 in the morning. A little boy would hand me a bag with flowers protruding from it. I had to give him the ring in a candy wrapper. She warned me not to try to double-cross her. Two men would be watching the whole transaction. She left me with a strange sentence, "We have to stick together." "This is all I have to tell," I say to my torturers. The effort and exhaustion takes its toll – I slump to the floor, unable to answer any questions.

The guard has to carry me back to the cell. Left alone I am reliving the past few hours. How did I have the presence of mind, under these horrible circumstances, to tell the story, which I had rehearsed time and time again. Whether I was on the go, or a train, at Ilse's house, it always lurched in the back of my mind. "What if I get caught? I must never disclose the real source – I have to know what to say – now I did. But will they believe me? What will they do to me next, brake my bones?" My question is answered. The guard, who comes with some water and a fresh pail, informs me that I will be executed in the morning. My story was not plausible enough. The physical pain from the torturous interrogation left me in a state of shock. It doesn't register what the guard is saying to me. He realized that and leaves. Every inch of my body aches. My face feels swollen. My behind is in raw welts. The cigarette burns are open – the skin cracked. After a while it suddenly hits me – they are going to shoot me. Panic overwhelms me. I don't feel the pain anymore, only sheer terror. I start crying and creaming, "No! No!" I mumble. I pray. I yell. The guard enters with a pitcher of water, a tray with food and even a cup of coffee. He stands in the door and looks at me kindly. He asks, "How old are you? You were calling for your Mommy and Daddy. Are you religious? You better pray." I tell him that I am not even 17 years old – am afraid of dying. Now I am crying, "I am so scared. Help me." He shakes his head and says, "You are really a child," and leaves. I drink the tepid coffee, wash my hands and face, and slump to the floor. So this is the end. I can't believe it. I don't want to believe it. I don't want to die. I have not lived yet. I must have cried myself to sleep. In a daze, I open my eyes – light floods my cell. Two guards stand above me. "Stand up!" they bark. I can't. They hoist me up, one on each side. They push and prod me. I have to be helped up the stairs. Before leaving the room they blindfold me. The door opens. Fresh cold air hits me. I stagger. Held by the 2 guards, we walk a few steps. Somewhere near us a car comes to a screeching stop. I hear steps and some brusque questions. The voice sounds faintly familiar, but in my dazed state I am probably imagining things – clinging to the last vestige of hope. Snatches of an angry word exchange reach my ears. Now the high-pitched, familiar voice shouts, "What the devil goes on here? Who has the authority to give orders here and make decisions without my knowledge? You know Heineman left me in charge here. Are some of the Kunde's guys interfering again?" "No sir, yes sir. Here is the order sir." A few moments of silence, the rustling of papers. I hear the voice: "But this is simply incredible, it can't be." The people who were standing near me must have walked away. Besides "Yes sir, yes sir, we shall do" – I can't hear anything. I wonder what goes on, why the delay. I must be out of my mind to think I know the man behind the voice. I must be hallucinating. Suddenly I am pushed forward and told to move. Somebody turns me around, my hands are tied behind me and fastened to something cold and metallic. A brusque command and a few shots ring out. I feel the impact of something passing me. Something falls around me with a crush. I shake crazily. Involuntarily I soil myself, feel the wetness running down my legs. I am so embarrassed – how stupid to feel that in such a situation. Two more shots fall very close to me. Do they intend to drive me crazy with

fear before the actual execution? Another cruel game inflicted on the victim. Two more shots close to my legs. Splinters and pieces of something hit me. A maddening silence follows. I can't perceive anything clearly anymore. I can't fathom the delay. I only don't want to shit down my legs. I can't die in shame. I still need a shred of dignity. I can't bear to hear the last words directed at me "Du Schmutzige Sau-Judin" (You dirty, filthy pig Jewess). Suddenly my blindfold is taken off. I am afraid to open my eyes. Someone shakes me – my eyes open. Facing me stands my ex-dancing partner from the Governor's Ball. He gives me a sign to follow him away from the two guards. He faces me saying, "Had I arrived 2 minutes later, you would be dead by now. It would have been better for you because where you are going, it will be worse than a quick death by a bullet. You will be dying ever so slowly – everyday in agony, wishing you were dead. You deserve a terrible end. The people who will be in charge of you will be advised of the crime you have committed against our "Vaterland" and our people. You will be dealt with accordingly." With a most contemptuous look, he spits at me and walks away. He must have issued some orders because the two guards come towards me.

I am back in the building. I am told to go to a washroom and clean up. Suddenly my little valise materializes. I am ordered to strip and put on everything fresh from top to toe. My burns and wounds ache, but I am biting my lips and dress quickly. I don't know what is going on – but I am alive. Events happen so quickly that I can't think, just blindly follow orders. I am given a small bag with my brush, comb, toothbrush, one change of underwear and a sweater. While I am waiting for further orders, the old guard from my cell enters the room. He comes close and says softly, "I have never seen anything like that in all the years I have worked. You owe your life to a quirk, a spiteful action of a man competing for power. You are a pawn in a chess game. You will be going to Montelupi jail for processing and afterwards to the Ghetto jail. Good luck to you child." He exits. I have not idea what he is talking about. I can't think clearly anyway. All I know is that I am alive – for the time being.

A guard escorts me. After a short car ride, we arrive at the Montelupi jail. While papers are being processed, I am locked in a cell. Hours pass. I am getting anxious. What if they don't approve of the way my case was handled? Will I be subjected to more torturous interrogations? I won't be able to survive it. As is, every part of my body hurts terribly. My fear mounts when an S.S. man orders me to follow him. We leave the building. My guard is waiting in the car. We are setting forth. After a short ride we reach the Ghetto and stop in front of the building marked "Jewish Police". We enter a room full of Jewish uniformed men. I stare at them – Jews in uniforms, boots, hats – like real police. My dossier is handed to them. My driver leaves and before I know it, I am taken to jail. The cell is almost dark. A few women and some children sit lethargically on wooden bunks. They look at me with a momentary flicker of interest and then return to their motionless stare. I stand near the door. No one utters a sound. Shall I say something? Should I introduce myself? I don't even remember my own, real name. I am tired and hungry, I sit down on the dirty bench. A long time passes. The silence is pierced by the children's shrieks – they are hungry, they want food. The mothers look at each other helplessly, with soft words calming their youngsters. It gets dark. The cell inmates are settling for the night. One woman points to a tiny place left for me to lie down. It is chilly. No one offers to share a cover with me. I sit huddled in my sweater reliving the events of the past two days. It is too much to fathom, too unreal. I am restless, am afraid if I let go I will get a delayed reaction and fall apart. I get up quietly and climb on the bench until I reach the window. The night is

dark and cool. Golden stars twinkle high above. I am alive. But what awaits me, "You will be sorry to be alive" --- I look out into the dark night. A great longing overwhelms me, to be free, to be safe, and warm, and not to be hungry. But I know it is a Utopian dream – it won't come true. Hot tears run down my cheeks. I realize the futility of my longing. I don't know how long I cried. I am near collapse. Gently, not to waken my cell mates, I ease into the small space left for me and fall asleep.

Harsh voices and clanking of keys awaken me. We file out to wash and use the toilets. Afterwards we get a chunk of bread and marmalade – also a lukewarm coffee-ersatz. I am nervous. Not having eaten since my "last supper", I devour my meager breakfast. I take a look at my cell mates. Some are occupied with their children; others just sit motionless, starring into space. My attempt to strike up a conversation is futile – they don't want to be bothered. I have so many questions: who are they, why are they detained, what is going on in the Ghetto? I respect their silence in spite of my trepidation and resume my post at the window.

After lunch we are allowed a 30 minute "time out" to use toilets. In the late afternoon there is an addition to our cell. A very young, skinny girl garishly dressed and painted stumbles into the cell. Before locking the door the guard pinches her buttock, lifts her skirt a little, leers and says "Your whoring out there is over. Let's see what we will do with you here." The silence in the cell is broken by a sudden outcry, "We don't want that piece of filth here, with our children!" – as though they had a say in that situation. The hostility is obvious.

I look at the new arrival. She is just a very frightened kid. In spite of her makeup and cheap appearance, she looks very young and vulnerable. She stands near the door, afraid to move. I make room on the bench and motion for her to sit down. She looks maybe 12 years old – I feel sorry for the kid.

When our evening meal arrives, there is no food for the new girl. I mention it to the guard who tells me to mind my own business – she will get food in the morning. She watches us eat. I can't swallow, motion her over and share my meager "dinner". Her grateful look says it all.

Lights out, our cell mates are settling for another night of misery, only the two of us remain seated on the hard bench. Her name is P. Her body shakes with sobs. She whispers thanks and tells me she has two brothers in a camp nearby. They are important. She will try to contact them in the morning. Obviously she was caught outside the Ghetto. I decline her offer to hear her story, pleading tiredness. I make room for her on my allotted place and pretend to go to sleep. In the stillness of the cell I hear her crying. I am occupied with my own dreary thoughts, "What next?" The night is long. I am restless. There is no room to turn around. P, worn out by hours of crying, is asleep clutching my blanket which I generously offered to share with her.

A new day starts. It is dark and dreary, heavy rain pelts the roof. After our morning meal, which I shared again, P is picked up. She comes back hours later and tells me she was able to send word to her brothers. In the afternoon one of them does come. I am watching their reunion, from the little window. He is in uniform. Like the Jewish policeman, his shiny, high boots draw my attention. P waves at me and so does he.

She is back in the cell, very excited at the prospect of having her brother's promise of help. The change in the guard's attitude is obvious; no more snide, suggestive remarks and the meals have an extra piece of bread for P to make up for the breakfast she didn't get. This infuriates our cell mates who call her names insinuating that her extra food is pay for "favors" of a dubious nature. They ridicule her feeble attempts to tell about her brothers. It almost comes to blows. If not for my intervention she would have been beaten up. Now the hostility swings towards me. That atmosphere in the cell is getting very unpleasant. The day passes in the prison routine. P clings to me, afraid that in the dark she will be attacked. Neither of us sleeps much.

Next day P's second brother shows up. After she comes back to the cell she is very quiet and sad. In the evening, after everyone is asleep, she whispers that all the people who are presently in jail are doomed. All, including the poor, little innocent children. Her brother told her about it. He will try to get her out. I can't believe what I am hearing. What did I gain? A few more days of life? A ray of false hope? So it is actually only a matter of time. How can I go through it again? What kind of torture of death is awaiting me now? My wounds and welts have not healed yet. I am in pain all the time from the burns on my body.

I make no attempt to sleep that night – am too agitated and scared. But the following two days pass. Nothing happens. On the third day, while everyone is still sleeping, a guard enters our cell. He tells P and me to take our few belongings and to follow him silently. It is still dark outside. He leads us into an adjoining building, unlocks a small, cluttered room and advises us to remain quiet. No further explanation. There is a lot of commotion outside. Hours pass. We are hungry and need to use the toilet. In the meantime we hear agonizing shrieks, screams and children crying - something horrible is going on outside. After a long time two Jewish policemen enter the room. One takes P outside. The other escorts me back to "our" cell which is completely empty. All our cellmates are gone. All their clothes are strewn in disarray. I beg the guard to answer a few questions. He is very young and ill at easy. He says, "Don't ask too many. I can't talk. All I can say is that they are all gone. Help yourself to whatever you can use because in a while all these clothes will be disposed of. Do it quickly. Take what you need. They won't come back ever, P's brother came for her," he said. I stare at him in disbelief. He exits quickly.

After he leaves, I look at the heaps of clothing and think of the women and children who just a few hours ago were here. I can't touch anything – am shocked. I am the sole survivor here. Where did P go? The young policeman comes back with food for me. He urges me again to take some clothes. This sounds too good. It means I am not about to be executed, I have to be practical. Qualms aside, I pick a few outer garments (two sweaters and a coat). It feels terrible to touch some stranger's belongings. Creepy, but I am cold and this is reality. A long night – with all the empty spaces, all the blankets available – feels eerie. I sit on the wooden bench, reliving the past few hours. What next? I shiver and shake – am frightened and cold. I wrap the coat around me. Have I really stopped that low to use a coat belonging to some woman who just a few hours ago was alive and is no longer here?

Lonely days of solitude and uncertainty follow. I am moved to a smaller cell. No one to talk to and nothing to do. No contact with the outside world, except the guards. They change. Some are nice, others very strict. From the few answers I hear that the Ghetto is very crowded and a

camp will be built to have all the Jews eventually transferred to. To my repeated questions, "Why am I in jail?", the same answer is "Orders from above."

In order to keep sane, I derive a plan – every day I will think of a different time of my past – from the earliest childhood recollections to the time I was apprehended. It helps pass the days. I think a lot about my parents and sister. I miss them. A terrible realization hits me: I was so determined to survive that in all the busy and hectic planning and doing I had not time to miss them, really miss them. A shameful truth I am not very proud of. I start analyzing my actions – things I did, lies I told, pretending to be someone else. How could I do it? And at the end of each day – the same question – "And what next?"

I spend a lot of time standing on the bench, looking out of the little window. My only diversion is to watch the daily progress of the budding trees and to follow whatever takes place in the courtyard.

Outside of these walls there is a pulsating life. There are some free people who walk, laugh, eat and live a daily routine. There is freedom out there and a life which I so desperately long for, but which is lost to me.

I wonder how Ilse is. Does she wonder why she doesn't hear from me? Did she have any inkling? Well, I will never know.

Every day, when my meals are brought to me, I ask the same question, "What is today's day and date?"

Amongst my belongings of my former cellmates I find a pencil and some pieces of paper – a chance to keep track of time. A month after my arrest my jail time ends. I am picked up at mid-day and taken to the office where a few Jewish policemen sit behind desks. After a few brief formalities I am told that I am lucky to have survived "our cell cleaning" (lots of laughter) and will be transferred to Plaszow – site for a future camp. While waiting for an escort, one of the policemen tells me that in the next two months that place will have to be built up to a huge camp in order to accommodate the present Ghetto occupants.

An important looking man enters the office. He looks at a folder and looks at me, reads over again and says, "That is some dossier we have on you. What have you done? There is someone who has it really in for you. The orders are for you to be placed in the construction and stone quarry group. There are some hard times ahead of you. I hope you will make it."

End of a chapter of my life.

As I write these pages, I am able to recall – with minute details – events, places, conversations, and emotions. What is about to follow has to cover a span of three years: Plaszow, Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. I will have to grapple with very painful memories – a task I am not sure I am up to. To bring back to the surface events buried deep down in my subconscious. Nothing can compare in scope to the brutality and inhumane treatments we were subjected to.

We are approaching the huge gate to Plaszow camp. With each step closer, I become more apprehensive. Three rows of electric barbed wires, interspersed with great watch towers. Enormous search lights penetrate the darkness, scanning a terribly desolate looking place. Guards with rifles meet us. I see a few wooden barracks scattered amongst graves and broken tombstones. A strong wind and the howling of dogs add to the eerie, macabre sight. The barrack I enter houses many women. On both sides of the long room are 3 tiered bunks; in the center is a small stove – lots of noise and commotion. I meet the woman in charge who briefs me about time schedule, roll calls and camp routine. She points the way to the latrine, tells me to hurry. The air outside feels good as I stumble amongst graves. Scared, I rush back to my new living quarters. It is bedtime. No one pays attention to me – am pushed around as I look for a free bunk. I finally collapse on an empty mattress. Tomorrow I will get a blanket, towel and some other allotted things. At the sound of a shrill whistle the lights go out. I sit on the cold, hard planks – hungry and very tired. All around me everyone is asleep. Hours pass. In vain, I try to sleep. The cold is penetrating. I am glad to have the coat I took from my ex-cellmate. With the first light of day, I hear the bugler sounding reveille. Everybody jumps out of bed. There is a rush to the latrine and cold water stalls. In a row of 5 we line up for a roll call in a large square, the "Appelplatz." We have to wait for the Kapo, the overseer, to be counted. It is a long wait in the damp, grey cold. After breakfast - coffee like liquid and bread – the various formations set out to their respective work assignments. I have to report to someone in charge. I am given a striped prison garb with a large red circle on the back, to make me more conspicuous, in case I might try to escape. I am assigned to the barracks and road construction. We have to carry big blocks of stone –on the double – down a hill. Anyone lagging gets viciously lashed with the whip of a watchful guard.

Around noon I am near collapse. My hands are scraped and bleeding. My back hurts. Me feet are sore and swollen. I stop for a moment to shake some sand out of my shoe, unaware of being watched. A barrage of savage blows on my back brings me down to my knees. This infuriates my overseer who starts kicking my head, spine, etc. At the sight of a metal bar in his hand, I stagger to my feet and resume work.

A noon whistle rescues me from further beating. I can not drag myself to line up for the noon meal. Enviously, I look at the girls eating their soup and bread. No one bothers to give me a tin cup, spoon or bowl. I sit on the ground, tears running down my swollen, grimy face. A girl nearby feels pity and gives me a few spoons of her soup. How will I be able to keep up? It surely would have been better had they shot me in the Ghetto. And this is only the first day, and I can hardly move.

After lunch we resume work. The weather changes. Suddenly a cold, gusty wind is followed by rain. I am chilled and drenched. I stumble on the slippery ground. The heavy stones fall out of my numb, swollen, cold hands. Our guard drives us faster and faster. The day seems endless. We march back for the evening roll call. Something is wrong. We are being counted over and over again. Someone is missing. After a while a skinny little man is brought forward and placed face down on a bench. 25 lashes fall on the fragile body – punishment for being late. Two inmates carry the limp body away – a bloody sight. We are dismissed and return to our respective barracks. I am assigned my bunk blanket, a piece of soap, a thin towel, a cup, a bowl and spoon. The girl next to me is older, seems very nice. We exchange a few pieces of personal information. Her name is Hela. I learn that she has a brother who has quite an important position in camp, as I understand, something to do with food purchasing for the inmates. He is very often in Krakow and has access to more food that the average inmate. She gives me a piece of bread with some marmalade – a treat I devour gratefully – not having eaten all day. I cry, touched by the first humane act, unexpected kindness. In the days to come I meet Hela's brother, Mundek – as nice a person as his sister. Occasionally they give me a little treat, a very much appreciated addition to the very meager daily ration of soup, bread and coffee-ersatz.

As days pass I am transferred to different working units. I am to join a team of 36 women. In tandem we pull trolleys filled with lime or granite. Those who trip or stumble are trampled or whipped without mercy. If unable to continue, shot. The camp Commander Amon Goeth has a daily morning routine. He stands on the balcony or on the steps of his villa – a pair of binoculars in one hand and a riffle in the other. He scans the prisoners pushing or pulling the passing lorries. If he thinks the prisoner is too slow, he simply shoots him or her. Once you witness such a scene, you learn the horrible fear. Will I be next? Pull, pull, pull or you die. Wherever or whenever Goeth appears, corpses are left in the wake of his steps. Murder is one of his passions.

As days pass, I learn who is in charge of us. There are several levels in the hierarchy of the camp authority. To start with: the Jewish Police, then Kapos (non-Jewish and German criminals sent to forced labor), followed by uniformed Germans of various ranks to the ultimate power – the Camp Commander Amon Goeth. The Police (O.D. abbreviate for "Ordnungs Dienste") dressed in tailored uniforms, caps, high boots, yielding whips enjoy special privileges. Headed by Wilek Chilowicz – his wife Marysia, Kerner, Goldberg, Finkelstein, Ferber are some of his "officers". To ingratiate themselves to the Germans – to show their efficiency – they not only exceeded given orders, they also abused their power over us, punishing us in a most cruel way. Bribery will decide a prisoner's fate - life or death. A corrupt, immoral group of people. Most despicable is Marysia Chilowicz who enjoys her power over us. She struts up and down during roll call using her whip viciously. For no reason at all she frequently singles me out and strikes me across my chest and face. I hate her.

My work assignments change ever so often. After weeks of working in the granite quarry pulling heavy trolleys, I am ordered to join the barrack-building units and road construction. It is a very strange feeling to see gravestones used to pave roads. A constant reminder that we are building a camp on top of a cemetery. Every single day many of our prisoners join the ones buried beneath us: either singled out by the blood thirsty Goeth or by mass executions. Shallow pits, occasionally a bulldozer cover the dead.

Exhausted from physical labor, in constant (back) pain and always hungry, a gnawing pain in the stomach. Some evenings, in spite of being dead tired, I can't fall asleep. I think of the food I disliked as a child, of my mother coaxing me to eat. I remember her saying, "Eat – be glad you have it. There are some hungry, starving in the world." Little did we know. And now I am dreaming of the most basic food – a good hot soup, a lump of sugar, something to put on top of the piece of hard bread we get. Not everybody around me is hungry. From what I hear and see, I deduce that many of the prisoners have some way and means to obtain extra food. The black-market is thriving. Blatant barter is going on. Obviously the prisoners must be able to hide some valuables which now pass hands in exchange for food. I see in my barrack girls eating furtively eggs, pieces of meat, and cookies. The sight makes my mouth water. How I envy them. I have nothing to barter with. I don't see Hela or her brother Mundek very often. They are nice and occasionally give me a little treat I am grateful for. Somehow I still have a little pride left – am ashamed to ask them for food. Who knows, if it continues, I might have to. In the meantime, there is one very persistent thought: Will I make it through tomorrow?

A horrible event took place yesterday. As we lined up on the "Appelplatz" for the usual roll call, Amon Goeth was walking past our rows. Every 10th prisoner in the first row was shot. I was the 8th in the first row. I don't know how I got back to the barrack. The sight of the execution left me numb. The girl shot to my left was still alive as she lay on the ground literally in front of me. She bunked above me, a sweet youngster. WHY?

One learns to exist from moment to moment, without thinking, merely trying to survive another day. Robots.

Some of our working contingents are assigned to labor outside of camp: factories in the city, the airport, the railroad building, and war related industries. Smuggling food from the city into the camp is thus possible. Hunger and greed outweigh the danger. In the evening, upon re-entering the camp, everyone is searched. Ingenious hiding placers are devised.

One day, a few lumps of sugar and a piece of butter are found. We are detained on the parade ground for hours. After a day of backbreaking work – hungry and tired – we stand on swollen feet, waiting. Finally, guards push the guilty inmates into the center. Goeth appears holding his two vicious dogs, straining at the leash. At his command, they pounce on the victims, tearing their flesh into a bloody pulp. Their bodies are dragged away to the infamous "execution hill" (Chujowa Gorka). Shots fall. A little lesson "for all of us". However, not even the risk of being caught is a deterrent. Smuggling continues, the black-market flourishes – and I am always hungry.

I am back in the construction group. We are driven relentlessly to speed up our tasks. New barracks have to be completed. Plaszow has to be completely built up and ready to accommodate the Ghetto people and all the new arrivals. When new deportees are expected, the camps population has to be reduced – by shooting and "resettling". We don't know, as yet, what that means.

There is a lady-architect in charge of our construction sight. She has a disagreement with the German supervisor as to the safety of the foundation. He complains to Goeth who summons her. We don't hear the exchange of words but we do hear the shot. Goeth killed her.

I spent over two years in Plaszow – from the beginning to the bitter end. It is impossible to describe it all, therefore, what follows will be random events or important developments that stand out in my troubled mind.

Almost every day new workshops are being created. We have now a small, commercial "city" holding a broad range of professions. There are tailor shops making uniforms for the German Army, jewelry shops, boot and shoe makers, upholstered furniture and many more. One day six prisoners are accused of sabotage. Two machines malfunction, slowing the production. The six are taken to "execution hill" where they are lined up in a row. They are given shovels to dig a ditch. On order they kneel. The guards aim. Shots fall. Another lesson for the rest of us. We watch it.

May 14th.....a date to remember (if I am correct?).

At 12 noon an announcement over the loudspeakers: "All inmates, all working units – interrupt work and appear within 20 minutes in roll call formation." Such an order meant big trouble. We are panic stricken. Are they going to kill all of us? Had we been less frightened, we would have noticed that we were totally encircled by guards armed with machine guns and dogs. We wait in the warm noon sun, in dead silence. Suddenly loud music floods the air. Three large trucks full of little children drive by. Shrill cries, "Mama, Mama". Little outstretched arms waving. It dawns on us, they are taking the children away. The heartbreaking shrieks and howls of the respective parents mingle with the gay, melodious Viennese-waltzes. A few desperate parents try to break through the encircling guards to run after the trucks. Some throw themselves at the feet of officers crying and begging. Dogs attack them, bleeding bodies on the ground.....and the music plays on.

We learn that some children seeing the round-up were able to hide in most unlikely places thus avoiding being killed.

Everyday after work, during certain hours, inmates are permitted to see their respective spouses, relatives and friends. I watch these "visits with sadness. I have no one. Nobody cares what happens to me. Besides being tired and hungry, I am also very lonely. The girl on my right, Fela, is newly married. Her husband is here in camp. They were married in the Ghetto six months ago. On my left sleeps little Genia. She is in love with Alek. They came to Plaszow together. The two girls talk about love and future plans. They have hope and dreams. It sounds incredulous to me. Maybe it is better not to face reality – or is it a delusion?

Sunday P.M. A shrill announcement over the loudspeakers. The entire camp has to assemble on the parade ground within 15 minutes. We fear such summon will bring another calamity. What else? In no time long formations of well drilled and trained inmates come running on the double. I halt in my trot and stumble at the sight of two gallows standing in full view. Two inmates are guarded by four policemen. One is pushed forward. He falls to his knees before the camp

commandant pleading, "Sir, I am innocent. I swear, I beg you to have mercy. Please let me live. I am only 17 years old." Over the loudspeaker a clipped order, "All eyes on the gallows. Anyone averting his head will be shot instantly." The youngster is pushed forward and ordered to climb up onto the stool. A rope is placed around his neck. The stool is kicked away. Suddenly, the rope slips over the boy's head and he falls to the ground. "Please don't", screams an inmate. One of the guards turns around. We hear two shots and a body slumps to the ground. "If anyone utters one more sound, 20 of you will die." The boy is lifted up. The second attempt is more successful. This time the execution is swift. A few jerks of the body, a protruded tongue, a few turns and the body sways slowly in the air. The second man, engineer K, attempted suicide. He cut his wrists in the morning. There was, however, still life in his limp, disfigured body. Three men have to help in the execution. The last rays of the setting sun flood the gruesome scene with fiery light. A scene so macabre that we remain standing motionless in utter silence, even after orders to disperse have been given.

I must have followed the crowd back to the barrack. I find myself sitting in a daze on my bunk. I can't pull myself together to line up for our evening "meal". I know I will probably cry at night from hunger, but at the moment I cannot think of being able to swallow. My eyes are closed but I see the horrible scene over and over and over. Such total disregard for human lives! The futility of our efforts to go on! What for?

Ever so often transports arrive – hundred upon hundreds of new prisoners – this time from Hungary. They come trudging, carrying bundles and valises, talking loudly in an unfamiliar language. Room has to be made for them. Numerous new barracks have been erected since my arrival but how will these hundreds of new arrivals be housed? The answer comes the next day.

A dark, cold, dreary day. Through the loudspeakers comes a shrill announcement, "All Blockalteste (Heads of respective barrack in charge of us – they were Jewish) are to report to the central office." By now, we have learned that any sudden change in our daily routine can mean only one thing – something bad and drastic is about to take place. We are scared. We hold hands and whisper, "Now what?" Soon we hear the familiar bugle sound. In no time we stand in perfect quadrant formation on the cold, windy assembly place. We stand for a very long time numb with fear. Two long tables and a few chairs face us. Finally, the Masters appear: our Camp Commandant Goeth, the Chief Surgeon, 2 camp doctors and 2 young S.S. officers. We are told to shed all our clothing. The cold rain and wind lash our naked bodies. We have to run back and forth in front of the seated "review stand". Dr. Blancke scrutinizes every single body, front and rear. Cynical comments accompany the show. Two brilliant spotlights illuminate the scene. Any sign of disease or weakness decides whether one is directed to the left or right. The skinny ones and the older go to the left. They are the majority. The others, who can be still utilized, go to the right – and all the time the music is playing in the background. A couple of days later, the "left group" is loaded into freight cars. We learn of their destination – Auschwitz. By that time, enough rumors have spread throughout the camp so that we know that Auschwitz means crematoria and extermination. This is how space for the newly arrived Hungarian transport is created.

Each time when new deportees are expected, the camps population has to be reduced – by shooting or sending transports to Auschwitz or other camps.

Random executions take place in different places in camp. One day two girls and I are assigned to wash windows in one of the offices. We witnessed the following scene: A few men were rapidly digging what looked to be a ditch. A German Kapo was rushing them. After a while he ordered them to leave. Six young girls were approaching, flanked by two officers. They stopped not far from the dug-up spot. The officers were talking to the girls who shook their heads. We could not hear the conversation, only tried (carefully) to see what was going on. The girls had to undress. The officers looked at the young, naked bodies standing across from them – legs apart, hands on hips in an expectant like position – waiting probably for cries or pleas of mercy. But the girls did something incredible. They joined hands and sang loud and joyfully in defiance of death. A few shots followed and the beautiful young bodies disappeared. Three men pushing wheelbarrows approached. Grim-faced, the Germans turned away. They passed us, close enough to hear their angry curse-words.

The news must have spread quickly. In the evening we hear the story. Ever so often some young, beautiful girls disappear. Rumor have it that they are sent to a "house of pleasure". After servicing dozens and dozens of Germans, these poor girls are "disposed of". Fraternization with Jewesses is a crime. All evidence must be eradicated.

Friedel is the woman in charge of our barrack. A tall, hard looking, handsome female, strict and quick to punish us. She has great power over us and we try to avoid her. One day, as I pass her little room she opens the door and motions me in. Her right hand is bandaged. She is trying to pull out some files and cards with her left hand. She is having problems and asks me to do a few things. She is surprised at my fluent German and wants to know more about my background. When I tell her about my mother studying music in Vienna and my parents being married there, she volunteers some personal information. She is Austrian but lived the last six years in Poland married to a Polish Jew. At the end of our little conversation, she asks me to help with her office work – write reports (that she dictates), enter data on cards and do some filing. For two days I feel almost like a human being. I work quickly and efficiently and in no time everything is in order. She watches me all the time and I know she is just looking for something to find fault with. She makes me nervous standing over me – watching my swollen, bruised hands, the torn nails, handling her papers. After two days she is able to use her right hand and I am dismissed. Before she lets me go she asks me if I want something. Oh God! Do I! I think of food, clothes, a different work assignment. I take too long to answer. She grows impatient. I blurt out, "Could I please have some underwear – mine is in shreds."

The next day, after working in the cleaning group, I am told to go to the "magazine" – a room full of clothes, shoes, suitcases – things that once belonged to women, girls and children who arrived here, people who were executed here, people who were sent to their deaths. I shudder at the thought of wearing dead people's underwear – but one learns – there is no place for qualms in our situation.

A couple of days later a new "uniform" is given to me. The same blue, striped prison garb – but without the big, red circle on my back. It feels good to be less conspicuous.

I stop to say "thank you" to Friedel. She is her usual hard, gruff self but she says something that makes me cry with gratitude. Starting the following week I will start working in the

"Grosschneiderei" – the Tailoring Workshop – far way from the stone quarries and the merciless beatings. Five more days and, hopefully, a turn for the better. I am too excited to fall asleep. I remember hearing about the Madritch factory where uniforms for the German Army are made. It is outside of Plaszow camp and the girls working there are treated well and receive more food. I know nothing about "Grosschneiderei"- sewing for sure, but what?

Next morning I am in a group of men and women working on road improvements. The "streets" are paved with gravestones. The spaces between them have to be filled with smaller stones. There are no machines or proper equipment. The men use heavy hammers to shatter big slabs of stones. We have to carry them where needed. It is hard work, arms feel like lead. Stones slip out of the swollen, bloody, cut hands. Our overseer, Kapo Karl, passes us quickly yelling, "Attention, everyone at attention." We hear horses hoofs. Amon Goeth comes riding towards us. A big white horse and the huge, arrogant man – a sight so frightening we freeze. His cold cruel eyes warn the humbly bent figures. He is looking for a victim. We are familiar with that look. The men pull their caps off their heads. One cap falls to the ground. The owner bends down to pick it up. Swift as lightening, the butt of a gun viciously crushes the man's head. Blood spurts and the body slumps. As the horse shies, a scared young girl moves aside. "Who gave you permission to move!" roars Goeth and shoots her. Her big brown eyes open – stare at the sky. Her mother throws herself on the motionless body and howls. Another shot – but it missed her. The woman hurls a stone at Goeth and shrieks, "You murderer! One day you will burn in Hell!" In a fury he starts shooting blindly. Dozens of twitching bodies lay scattered in grotesque positions. There are very few of us left – and the sun shines over the bloody field, making it unreal. Goeth turns his horse right over the corpses and rides away. It is just one of those days when he lusts for Jewish blood. Unfortunately there are many such days when inmates fall victims to his un-satiated, sick craving. Even Kapo Karl seems disturbed by the scene. To cover his unease, he shouts, "How am I going to finish this damn road with half a manpower" Go, go away!" We leave in a daze. I feel sick. Bile rises to my throat, nothing in my stomach to throw up. I drag my feet in the direction of my barrack. As I am nearing it, I see a pair of shiny boots, a uniform of the Jewish Policeman, a black visor cap over an unfamiliar face. He blocks my way saying "Hello, Hello how are you? Am I glad I have finally found you." I look at him – a think darkish face, green eyes, prominent thin nose and a gold front tooth. Vaguely something registers. P's brother, who came often to visit her in jail. He pumps my hand. "I have been looking for you for months but P. only knew your first name. Not easy to find you amongst the thousands of women. I am greatly indebted to you. I will not forget how nice you were to my sister. Where do you work? How are you doing? Looking at you, not very well apparently. Maybe I can help. Now, I have to go back. I will try to pass by tomorrow. Here, take these." He passes three cigarettes into my hand. "That's all I have." I give them back to him. "I don't smoke. I am very tired. See you."

As I enter the barrack, Friedel summons me to her room. Oh God, now what trouble awaits me. She actually smiles, something I have never seen. I am nervous. She has some punishment in mind. I can hardly believe what she says, "How stupid can you be? I have seen what you refused. Don't you know that some people will do anything to get a smoke?" I was unaware that she had seen it all. "I don't smoke. I don't want to be caught having cigarettes. I don't know anyone to barter with. It is risky and I am afraid." I said it all very quickly. She looks at me long and hard. These are her words, "I have been watching you. In all these months you

have been here, you haven't done well for yourself. You might be bright and intelligent, but you are really stupid. You will not survive this hell being a quiet loner. You have to hustle. You have to learn to use people, mingle, make friends (pretend). You never know who can help you. On your own – no chance –you won't make it. Now go." She pushes me out roughly, slamming her door. I move slowly towards my bunk. Her words ring in my head. What does she mean? How am I supposed to do what she said? I am confused, tired and still shaken from Goeth's carnage. I start crying and I cry for a long time. I think of all I have done and gone through since my parents and sister were taken away. The futility of the long struggle, the uncertainty of surviving another day, the constant hunger, the constant fear and why do I still want to live?

Because I am afraid of dying !

An announcement is made: Ten yards of material are missing from the workshop where uniforms are made for the German Army. As a lesson to all, ten people from that workshop are hung. All of us have to pass it. We are ordered to look at it. The bodies sway in the breeze as we march by – in stuporous obedience.

Nine months have passed since my arrival – spring, summer and fall – filled with incredible horrors, backbreaking work, hunger and fear of being the next victim. Each day starts with the same thought, "Will I make it?"

It is my last day in the road improvement detail. Snow mixed with rain is falling. I am freezing in my thin uniform. My bare legs look blue. I drag my aching feet through the slippery mud. I can hardly keep up with the pace. We are moving planks and stones from one place to another. Nothing can be accomplished in this weather, which infuriates our Kapo. Ever so often he takes a gulp from a flask, an ominous sign for us.

He is known for his cruelty. Yesterday he had a prisoner lifted up with the crane together with the rubble and buried him alive in the dug-up space. Fortunately, there is no crane in sight. One of my clogs gets stuck in the mud. I stop for a moment. Kapo sneaks up from behind and flogs me with a short whip made of braided leather. This beating leaves me bleeding. The skin breaks in a few places. After work I head towards the infirmary to be cleaned and bandaged. Several inmates ask me, "What happened?" – as though such a sight would be unusual. It makes me angry.

As I enter the infirmary, I see Wladek sitting – his left leg stretched out, the shin bruised and crusted with blood. He explains that while grooming Goeth's horse he was kicked. He looks at me and asks, "And what happened to you?" I collided with a streetcar" I reply sarcastically. He ignores my stupid reply and repeats his questions. Maybe the stress of the whole day – my pain, wet clothes and chills made me very tired and weary. His questions annoy me and I burst out: "You want to know? I have been working for 9 months in construction and stone quarries. I have been beaten without mercy, always cold, exhausted and hungry. Anything else you want to know? He shakes his head and says, "Why didn't you try to contact me. I owe you a favor – I would have helped you." I don't know what came over me. My reply was insulting and rude. "Only because you wear a uniform, you are so important. I know all you O.D. men bribe people with the loot from the Ghetto people's bloody money." He turns red, looks at me sadly and says,

"You are really in bad shape Halina. Now let me tell you something. Yes, I was present at the Ghetto liquidation. Yes, I found some hidden jewelry and money, but the people were gone and I have never, never harmed anyone. And, if I can put it to good use, make my life easier, bring food to the camp – I have no qualms about it, even if I profit from it. After all, we all try to survive." With that he leaves me to see the nurse. I feel terrible, am deeply ashamed of my totally uncalled for rude outburst. I leave after my cuts and bruises are taken care of. Tomorrow is Sunday, a change in my life. I have to report to the sewing workshop – hopefully for better days to come.

I am very apprehensive as I enter the "Grosschneiderei" (sewing workshop). Rows after rows of women are working at sewing machines. In between sit "finishers" who do manual work (buttonholes, sewing buttons on, etc.). Mr. Klassner is in charge. I also meet someone who seems to be either the foreman or a "head" tailor. My sewing qualifications are not very good. I don't know how to use a machine. My swollen, bruised, cut hands can hardly hold a needle. I am afraid to be sent back. I address Mr. Klassner, "I am fluent in German and I have bookkeeping experience." I explain my work as a production statistician (during the Russian occupation) in salt mines and, prior to it, my apprenticeship as a daily log keeper in oil well production. "I am neat, have good penmanship and am quick to learn." My urgent sales talk amuses Mr. Klassner and I am allowed to stay. I begin by acquainting myself with the production procedures. I take notes, ask pertinent questions and learn that each person has a quota to fill – 8 pair of pants per day or 6 uniform jackets. Material comes precut from a different department. Work is done in two shifts – day and night. In no time I learn what my duties are. I try hard to prove my ability to handle my work efficiently. I have a little nook with a desk, chair and shelf – my "office". Very carefully, I improve the card-file system, keep neat ledgers, and – time permitting – help out with odds and ends, pitch in sewing on buttons, etc. My work is praised, improvements noticed and I am glad to be far away from the stone quarries. There are two more positive changes – I am transferred to a different barrack and given some clothes which I am very grateful for. A little more protection from the bitter cold, especially during the roll call hours.

Time passes quickly in my new workplace. Every day I try to improve my bookkeeping. The production reports are neat and concise. I suggest to the foreman that as an incentive, bread rations could possibly be increased. It works. After a few days, results are obvious and of course he takes credit for it. If I could only stay in the workshop for both shifts, I would not have to face the horrible daily camp routine. A silly, unreal wish. In the meantime, as months pass, hunger and hard work take their toll. "Selections" are more frequent. More and more prisoners are being deported. We hear repeatedly the name Auschwitz and horror stories about gassing and crematoria. As the number of the camp inmates declines more new transports arrive.

Our evening roll call is endless. We stand in formation for 2-1/2 hours being counted and recounted. Two prisoners are missing, the search for them still going on. It gets dark. Searchlights from the watchtowers illuminate the whole scene. Shouting, running, dogs barking. They are caught while trying to crawl under the barbed wires. When Goeth arrives with his two dogs (Rolf and Ralf) we know what to expect. Two young boys covered with (what looks from afar) mud, are dragged into the center of the field roll call ground. At Goeth's command, his

vicious dogs attack the boys. The dogs are trained to kill and go straight for the jugular if unrestrained.

It doesn't take long and the horrible screams die down. Another lesson for anyone who might think of attempting to escape.

During one morning roll call Marysia Chilowicz stops in front of me. She slaps my face and yells, "Why are you not wearing the stripped-prisoner-garb and where is the red circle you wore on your back?" I explain that I work now in the "Grosschneiderei" and was ordered to wear these clothes. "If anyone gives orders its me!" she screams. "I will get back to you for sure." She shows up during the day in our workshop. As soon as I see her, I know I am in trouble. She talks to Klassner and our German supervisor who shakes his head. I can't hear the conversation. She leaves. I am told she wants me removed and they refused. I am scared. I know nothing will stop her. I beg my two bosses to help me. They tell me to go back to work.

One of our workers has a brother who is an O.D. (Jewish police) man. She knows what is going on and what is about to happen. A big deportation will take place within the next two days. Lists are being prepared, who is leaving for other camps and who is going directly "to the chimneys." 150 people will be crammed into closed boxcars which hold a maximum capacity of 70. I don't want to hear the horrible stories. That evening, after we have our soup and bread, I notice an unusual unrest and agitation amongst my barrack-mates. Most of them rush to see their husbands, boyfriends or other relatives. Although barbed wires separate men from women, one can still try to talk and communicate. I watch as a lot of the women come back crying. They are saying goodbye in anticipation of the forthcoming deportation. Not many of us sleep that night. Some cry. Some pray. I stare at the dark sky and wish the night would not end.

Contrary to everyone's expectations nothing happened for the next two days. An eerie calm pervaded the camp. Some people talked about the reason for the deportation delay. Trains and boxcars were needed to transport the loot from Poland to Germany. Mountains of looted Jewish possessions.

The feared day arrives. While we stand on the roll call ground, the names from "the list" are read. There is no end to it. Hundreds of inmates are ordered to come forward. Now they are being counted, and counted, and recounted. Something is obviously not right and we are getting more alarmed. Seven are missing. A search for them starts. We know that once found they will be shot. In the meantime seven people have to replace the missing. The special police guard start at random picking out seven replacements. A quota has to be filled. I can't believe when he points at me. I freeze, can't step forward. He yanks me out. I tumble forward. He probes me in the back with his gun. In a daze I join the other six and we march forward. So it finally happened. Now it is my turn to join the others on our "final" journey. In no time the red boxcars are full. More and more bodies are pushed in until 150 people are counted. The doors are locked and bolted. We stand squeezed against each other. No space to move or shift. The train doesn't move. We sag from exhaustion. No place to sit. It gets hot and smelly. There is a bucked in one corner but only the ones near it can use it. We have not way of reaching the bucket. After a few torturous hours, one by one, people start relieving themselves standing. The

stench gets unbearable. We can hardly breath. Fights erupt, screaming, pushing and crying. Many pass out.

I am getting short of breath, am afraid I will suffocate. The more I panic the worse it gets. I am dizzy and sad. The bodies around me keep me upright. Hours pass. I am scared. It is very noisy outside. I hear dogs barking, shouts of command, running, yelling and occasional shots. There is sudden commotion at our boxcar. We hear bars pulled up. Doors open suddenly and all the people near the door tumble out. Some try to stand up on shaky legs. Some just lie motionless on the ground. A few jump and fall on top of each other. I am pushed out of the train car and collapse. A vicious kick in my back sends me sprawling on the ground. In a daze I hear my name being repeated. It is my foreman. He pushes me to the side, talks to the guard and helps me to my feet. I have difficulty walking and lean heavily on him. He asks a passing O.D. man to escort me back. It is dark by now. We have to rush. As I turn to thank my foreman, he shakes his head and says curtly, "I expect you back at work tomorrow," and he leaves.

I can't think straight. I sit on my bunk crying and shaking. Have to rush, to wash up. The icy water helps clear my head. My life was saved once more. I find out the next day that after a considerable delay other boxcars were reloaded and the transport went to Auschwitz. I don't want to know details, why and when – the nightmare of the experience lingers for days. Next day, I am afraid to go to the morning roll call. What if Chilowicz or his wife find out about my "return"? Unnoticed, I manage to reach my workshop. Two changes are apparent – about a dozen of the older seamstresses are gone and besides the precut material for making pants, there are boxes full of uniforms standing near my cubicle. They are not new, to the contrary, very much in need of repairs. By the looks of it – they have seen "action". After the expert-tailor evaluates what repairs are needed, I have to set up a different record system. I am glad to be very busy – less time to think. As events take place, it becomes evident that sooner or later all of us will have to be eliminated – one way or another.

After our evening soup, I head towards my barrack. I see Wladek coming towards me. No way to avoid him. I do not know how to face him after my rude, idiotic behavior in the infirmary. After he accepts my apologies, he hands me a piece of fragrant soap - lilac. I don't want to offend him again so I take it with many thanks. As I am about to leave he says, "I know what happened to you. I am on very friendly terms with your supervisor. I asked them, if possible, to alert me if something unusual should happen to you again. Yes, Halina, I did bribe them. I have to go now." He turns and leaves me standing there dumbfounded.

There were some prisoners in Plaszow whose life is a little easier, either due to their professions or by being related to some "more important" people. Goeth's musicians, the Rossner brothers and their families, the Horowitzes, Pfefferberg and, of course, the O.D. men and their respective families. Wladek works in the stable taking care of Goeth's horses. He also drives him daily to Krakow. While Goeth attends to his business, Wladek has to wait for him, which gives Wladek a chance to contact some Polish people he knows. He obtains food and since he is not searched, he can bring it back safely into the camp).

More and more "unfit for labor" are being eliminated. Deportations are more frequent. Train loads leave Plaszow making room for new arrival. Transports from Romania, Hungary as well

as from different parts of Poland arrive. These people are still in possession of their belongings and, in spite of death warnings, manage to smuggle in jewelry and gold. Trading and black-market thrives. The corrupt Jewish Policemen take bribes, taking advantage of newcomers. A ruthless bunch, riding high on their temporary power.

One day during morning roll call, eight names are called out over the loudspeakers; my name is amongst them. We are completely bewildered. There is no transport in progress. We are taken to an office where a German officer informs us of a great honor bestowed upon us. We seem to be familiar with office work and speak German fluently. We will be given assignments outside of the camp. We are allowed to rest for a day and then outfitted with pretty, civilian clothes. We will be given details as to what is expected of us. Before leaving the office he remarks, "You will have plenty of good food. You will be free. You will have to be very alert and keep your eyes open." We are allowed to return to our respective barracks for the night. I am thinking frantically: I will be out of this hellish place, have food – too good to be true. Something is not plausible. What are they going to do to us? I want so very much to be free but at what price? Two possibilities occur to me: either we have to spy and denounce people or we will be used, like the eight unfortunate girls that were executed after they entertained the Germans in Krakow. Either way, once we have been used and finished "our tasks" we will be eliminated anyway. I will not go. Where can I hide? What am I to do?

As the night hours pass, my panic increases, can't stop shaking. Morning only increases my fear. After roll call I am told to return to my barrack. My request to report to my work at my workshop is denied. I am too agitated to rest. I see one girl from "our group" and ask her what she is going to do. Her sad answer, "Do we have a choice?" says it all.

After a long and thorough wash-up we are taken to the clothes warehouse. A few minutes later I am dressed: a nice dress, sheer silk stockings, high heel leather pumps, a lovely coat, gloves and pocketbook. I revel in the texture and sight of these things. It has been a long, long time since I felt such pleasure. For a few moments I forget what this is all about – it is unreal. A harsh command and a push brings me back to reality. "Get going, stop dreaming!" I look at the other girls and hardly recognize them. They look like normal, pretty young girls. As we are leaving the depot, I see Wladek and Hujar (a German overseer) walking towards us. They stop, look at us. Hujar asks our guard a question. Wladek stares at me. As we proceed, we hear a great commotion coming from the camp's entrance gate. Huge columns of people stand in formation being counted. Looks like a new transport, which means we can expect a massive deportation from our camp.

We enter the office. Kunde is seated at a desk. Another German officer is looking through files. Kunde looks us over. "Oh, our pretty girls are here. They are about to flee the coup," he chortles sarcastically. I don't know how I got the nerve to address him. "Sir, would you please excuse me from the assignment planned for us? It has been a very long time since I lived in the normal world. I won't be able to function properly in the outside environment anymore. I will only bungle whatever I am supposed to do. Also, I just recently got over a mild case of shingles. I have no rash on my skin, but it might not be advisable for me to be in close contact with the outside, especially German people."

He stares at me incredulously and for a moment is speechless. "What audacity! How dare you speak to me. Don't you know that you have no right to speak, only to listen and obey. You dare to open your mouth once more and a bullet through your head will silence you forever. I just have the mind to do it." At that moment Scherner and another officer rush into the room saying, "How are we to handle all these hundreds of people out there? Who gave the orders to unload the trains? We didn't expect them until late this afternoon when Goeth returns. We need your help."

Our little group is in the way. Kunde is about to leave the room. "Take these girls back for the time being – until tomorrow and tell Hujar or John to get rid of that one" – pointing at me. "But first let her stand in the coffin for a couple of hours."

Although I have been in Plaszow for two years (at that point) I have never heard of a coffin. The seven girls from our group leave. I am taken "for a little fun before the execution" the guard says, as he pushes me into a narrow, upright box. He locks me in and leaves. On both sides, some nails or prongs stick out. As soon as I try to lean I feel jabbed. I am frantic. How long will I have to stay in this torture device? Even though I have managed to kick off my high heeled shoes, my feet feel numb, no space to sit or crouch. I can't stand anymore. I slide down – my new finery ripping, my palms bleeding. I yell, "Help, help, help – oh please, help me!" but to no avail. Why didn't Kunde shoot me right then and there? How are they going to get rid of me? Hang me? Shoot me? Oh God, I am so scared. I cry and bang my first against the front panel. I must have peed. My feet and legs are wet. Don't know how much time has passed. The door opens and I fall forward. I am yanked up by the hair. "Let's go. Keep moving. Move fast!" shouts one of the two guards. "We are going to the hill top to see the sunset," says the second one, laughing. So this is it, to the "Chujowa Gorka" where all the executions take place. I still can't believe it. It is going to hurt? I look at the sun. It is red, about to set. I don't want to die. Oh God, help me! We are almost there. I see in the distance masses of people – the new arrivals. How I wish to be amongst them, to stay alive no matter how horrible camp life is. Why are we stopping? One of the guards moves ahead. We wait for a while. "Start undressing." We won't waste time up there" says the German. With my bloody, torn hands I am slow and clumsy which infuriates him. I get slapped and kicked. I am undressed except for my soiled panties and stockings. He looks at me in disgust saying, "You dirty pig." A thought – the same scenario happened before – a humiliation before the execution. Someone comes running towards us waving a sheet of paper. My guard reads it and says, "What does that mean?" I am ordered to put my clothes back on. We are going back. Kunde is standing with Wladek. As we come nearer I see him strike Wladek and he says, "Your luck, I am in a good mood now – you dog. We will let her go for now. Let your boss, Commandant Goeth decide your wife's fate tomorrow." He turns to me and barks, "Disappear! Make it fast! You will be late for roll call." I stand there in a daze. Am I dreaming or have I lost my mind? A push and a slap. I start running towards the barracks oblivious of the stones and gravel cutting into my shoeless feet. After the roll call I return to my barrack which is crowded with new faces. My bunk is occupied by a stranger. My belongings are missing. Timidly I knock on the supervisor's door. She looks at me in amazement. "What the hell are you doing here!" is the greeting. After hearing me out, she shakes her head and says, "I don't believe a word you said. What is going on with you? No such thing ever happened here." I just stand there sobbing, drained and exhausted. She find a place for me to stretch out an even gives me some bread and water. I remember that as she

hands me the bread I start laughing hysterically. She shakes me until I stop. "It is the first time in two years that I am not hungry, even though I have not eaten all day," I say. "You are in shock, try to rest" – the first kind words ever said by this hard, cruel woman. I lie down. I can see the sky through the open window and the golden twinkling stars. It is calming, just to gaze and wonder, "Will I still be alive tomorrow night?" I am confused as to how and what happened. Once more my life was saved – not by my wits or my doing. Hours pass. I don't want to sleep. The more I think about the events of the day, the more confused I get. When I report to work I am greeted with stares, even the foreman looks at me strangely. No one asks and I do not volunteer any explanation.

I can't concentrate on my work. Kunde's reprieve was but a temporary suspension of the execution. I was granted one more day of life. Now Goeth will be told. I can't expect anything good. The uncertainty is just too much. I am so scared. The Democlese's sword hangs above my head. I am afraid it will come down soon…and my head will roll…

We are assembled for the evening roll call. A long wait, until we see Goeth approaching with the usual entourage and his two dogs. No matter how many hundreds of times one sees him, the fear is indescribable – DEATH PRECEDES AND FOLLOWS HIM. Very slowly and deliberately he passes through our ranks stopping ever so often. Chilowicz trails at a respectable distance. All of a sudden I hear my name called. I can't move. The woman next to me hisses, "It's you." Chilowicz comes running, screaming, "Are you deaf?" He hits me with his whip and pushes me towards Goeth. Oh God, he is going to shoot me. I have never been that close to this monster – a huge, fat man. I don't dare to look at his face. I am told to state my name and place of work. Goeth asks, "How long are you in Plaszow – and what did you do since?" I try to speak clearly and precisely, to the point. He comments on my proper German to which I reply that it is my mother-tongue. He asks Chilowicz to bring my foreman over and I am dismissed. As I return to my place I can't believe that he didn't kill me. I am also relieved that I didn't pee in my pants – since I didn't have any – it might have been visible. When we disperse everyone wants to know what transpired but I can't explain.

The next day Wladek comes. He has some time off. I am tongue-tied. How does one say, "Thank you for saving my life?" Instead I ask, "Please tell me exactly what happened. I am grateful but terribly confused.

This is what he told me: He bribed Hujar, with whom he is on good terms since he accompanies Wladek (as a guard) when he drives Goeth. Hujar told him what is going on so he approached Kunde with a story that while he was helping with the new arrivals a woman slipped him a ring, obviously afraid of being searched. It was a diamond ring which Wladek offered Kunde for my life. The next day when Kunde spoke to Goeth he did not mention the ring, only his consideration for Goeth's decision. Wladek repeated the same story and gave Goeth another piece of jewelry. When asked whether I am his wife, he said that a couple of days before we were supposed to get married we were separated in the Ghetto but that he still hopes that one day we will be married. Goeth reply was, "You have hopes, you stupid fool? Don't you know? All of you will be going up in smoke, very soon. Jah! But for the next few weeks she can live."

All through that I cry thinking what risks Wladek took offering valuables which is punishable by death. He risked his life to save mine. To cover up his embarrassment at seeing me sob, he says, "Maybe from now on you will refrain from your rash criticism about my bribery and black-market dealings. As you see, one can do something good with it." With these words he pats my wet cheek, slieps a candy into my hand and leaves. I feel diminished to the size of a fly. I don't feel too good about myself. I am ashamed of my past rudeness and behavior. And now this enormous guilt feeling and gratitude. I am rehashing all I heard, especially that we will be "going up in smoke" – which clearly means only one thing – Auschwitz. Has all the struggle and hardship been in vain? So, with each passing day we shall be closer to the ovens. I know I will have to push this thought into the back of my mind or I will crack up and fall apart.

The next days gruesome occurrence shook us out or our gloomy musings.

As I have mentioned, at the beginning of my Plaszow description the immediate supervision and management of the inmates rested in the hands of the O.D Jewish Police headed by Wilek Chilowicz, his wife Marysia and five senior "officers". They had the power to decide our fate, to punish us – which was in most instances unjust and brutal. During the Ghetto liquidation they amassed vast wealth, part of which they handed over to Goeth and his cronies.

It comes to us as a great shock when one day, upon returning from work, we have to pass a specially elevated "display" stage. There in a row lay Chilowicz, Marysia and the five senior "officers". They had all been shot. After the body viewing we are ordered to our usual line-up-ground. We are stunned. Obviously, if they start eliminating the prisoners from the very top, we must be next.

By the end of the summer, 1944, rumors spread that the Russians have advanced into Poland and the front is nearing. The murderers have to erase traces of their crimes. One by one each of the workshops is closed. All productions ceased. Ours, where uniforms were made, has no material left – only a few badly "damaged" uniforms sent obviously from the front. At this point there is no longer a demand for German uniforms. Gradually, the liquidation of the camp begins. Daily transports are taking prisoners out of the camp. Food rations are cut to a minimum. Barracks have to be dismantled. I have come a full circle – from building up the camp to its final stage – dismantling everything. No traces can be left. All evidence has to be removed. I am back in the physically taxing labor group tearing down and digging up – exhausting work.

No more trains are available to transfer prisoners. Every locomotive available is needed for military purposes only. Mass slaughter takes place. We hear nightly air raids – the sweetest sound for us. Rumors of Russian troops advancing. The population of the camp is dwindling. The Germans are still determined to exterminate the remaining Jews. I overhear two German guards gabbing: 8000 prisoners died in Plaszow either of natural causes or by mass executions. Now the evidence has to disappear. Mass graves have to be dug up. From early dawn to late night this gruesome work continues. Man dig up corpses. We women carry planks of wood – to place the corpses between them. Human pyres burn day and night, permeating the air with an incredible stench. The sky looks red and hundreds and thousands of decomposed Jewish bodies burn. Dante's Inferno? No. The work of the highly, cultured, "civilized" German race!

The terrible smell of burnt flesh hovers over the camp. Many of us working at that site get sick, nauseated from the stench. Of the hundreds of barracks only a few are now left. The camp has to disappear from the surface of the earth. Very few Germans are visible. Of the 15,000 there are only 500 of us left. We don't know what is actually going on – but we do know that the end is near – and we continue to liquidate whatever is left. It is an eerie feeling to see a huge, almost flat surface, where not so long ago thousands of people lived and worked productively. Goeth has not been seen in days. Rumors have it that truck loads of his amassed, stolen loot leave his villa.

It is Sunday, late afternoon. I have just dragged my weary body into the barrack, am exhausted and hungry. Wladek appears. He too looks tired. He gives me a pear. Something I have not seen or eaten in years. He stops my thanks. We have to talk. It is urgent." First, he wants to know a lot about my family's whereabouts: do I have any relatives left, etc. He then informs me that he has a plan to escape and wants me to go with him. He has connections and knows many people in Krakow and vicinity who might help. His last sentence is, "I will take care of you. Don't worry. I will take good care of you." He will not disclose details of his escape plan except that one of the German guards is ready to help – he can use a few pieces of jewelry. I am stunned. The vision of freedom is tempting, but I am a coward – my answer is NO. I remember the escapees who were caught and hung in front of us. I am a coward, am too scared.

He looks at me sadly and says, "Is that the true reason or is it me? In a flash I understand his implication. I take his hand and say, "You are by far a better human being than I. I would never risk my life the way you did to save another person's life. You are a good man and deserve the best. Good luck but I will not join you." It is the last time I see him. He leaves me with a pear and a great feeling of guild. A long, sleepless night follows. I am sad and apprehensive. Did I do the right thing? What will happen to us now that the liquidation is almost completed? Why didn't I think before giving such a hasty "no answer"? But I have not guts.

We live in expectations of our final hour. There is no more hope left. I overhear a conversation between two German officers – something about Goeth being arrested and released because of ill health. That explains why we haven't seen him around for quite some time. As a matter of fact, none of the Germans we knew are visible. The few new ones are subdued, even the usual brutality ceased. We expect our liquidation to take place any moment. The days are getting short. It is cold and gloomy. There is very little food left. It comes as no surprise when our final day in Plaszow arrives. After the 5 a.m. reveille, we line up once more for the count, which doesn't take a long - there are not many of us left. We stand in the chilly morning air for a long time watching trucks leave, full of Germans and their belongings. We are next to leave. I look around the desolate, empty camp where I have spent my youth. Goodbye PLASZOW!

Five abreast, in column formation, we leave Camp Plaszow. This time no music accompanies our departure. Our convoy is escorted by guards, holding guns at the ready. "Attention prisoners, keep even pace, do not look to the sides. Anyone lagging behind or stepping out of formation will be shot."

And so we started our long march to Auschwitz. On the way, trucks full of Germans pass us. It is very cold and windy. We have only the clothes we wear, no cover for the early November

chill. Our only possession is the piece of black, stale bread. We walk in silence. We prod and push the ones slowing down. Only one brief rest is allowed. No water or latrines, one does what one has to do while walking or standing. Dead tired and cold, we arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The barbed wires are interspersed by tall columns topped with powerful lights. We have to wait – there are masses of people ahead of us. Two German officers and two women in long, black capes are conducting a selection. We are familiar with the "to the left and to the right" procedure. One means death – the other a temporary reprieve. Some "local" prisoners pass us. They whisper, "Stand straight when facing Mengele and Irma." So these are the two infamous "Angels of Death", that we heard about in Plaszow. There is a terrible odor in the air. We know what that is. Are we next? I am numb with cold and fear. One of our sadistic guards takes pleasure in detailed descriptions of the horrors awaiting us. He tells of shower rooms where instead of water deadly gas comes down and horrible screams of the people inside. We are finally moving inside the camp – towards the bath house. We have to wait outside for a long time – totally exhausted and chilled to the bone in our thin clothes. We huddle against each other in the bitter cold. The guard sees it and laughs, "Do you see the big smokestack? Underneath is a big oven. Soon you will be toasty warm."

We are finally in the building, ordered to undress. We have to line up against a wall. If not quick enough, guards hit our naked bodies with truncheons. We must undergo oral, rectal and vaginal exams. We lie stark naked on a table under a glary light while they probe in the presence of drunken guards who make obscene remarks. How much more humiliation can one endure? After a long wait, our hair is being clipped off and shorn. Now we go into the shower – our naked bodies squeezed against each other, afraid to breath, our terror stricken faces looking up. A woman slumps dead before the first drops of cold water hit our bodies. We are hysterical with relief. After the shower we are smeared with a terrible smelling disinfectant and are given some "clothes". One girl gets a child's sweater with a pair of men's pants; another gets and evening dress and tennis shoes; a woman next to me receives a men's jacket but no pants with a pair of galoshes. I get a burlap sack dress and a pair of men's shoes without shoelaces, about 4 sizes too big. I tear off pieces of my sleeves and stuff them into my shoes not to loose them. We have to put these clothes on our wet, cold bodies and stand again outside waiting to be shown our barrack. While we stand, a young girl next to me asks the guard, "What are they going to do with us next?" He is drunk and takes her by the shoulder and slurs, "You want to know?" I will tell you. From your hair we make mattresses and pillows. From your fat, if you have any, we make soap. From your ashes we will make fertilizers to enrich the German soil. But it is now too late – you see – it is the end. Germans will soon be kaput – the Russians" – He didn't finish his babbling. He threw up all over his boots.

We enter an assigned barrack. The room is long. In the faint light I discern bunks that look like wooden cages. Twelve of us have to share one. We have to sleep on bare boards, one very thin cover for all – barely covering four of us. The roof is obviously leaking, top tiers are wet. There is no floor, only dirty earth which turns to mud. We have had nothing to drink since Plaszow. The dry piece of black bread was long finished. It doesn't look like we will get something to eat or drink soon. One girl and I decide to look for a latrine. We are risking to loose our space on the bunk; but maybe we will find water. Instead of water, my companion finds a friend who came to Auschwitz four months ago. Besides tales of horror, she tells us a few bits of

encouraging news. Two of the crematoria were blown up in October by inmates (saboteurs). The remaining crematoria work around the clock to liquidate as many as possible before the Russians arrive. She heard that there is no time to tattoo all the new arrivals. I leave the two friends and set out in search of water. Unfortunately there is only a trickle of brown water coming out of the pipe in the washroom. It smells of some chemical, but I drink a few drops of it which is not a good idea. I feel a bitter, burning sensation in my throat and I start coughing.

Heavy rain comes down in the middle of the night. We take turns standing in the doorway, face up, mouth wide open, just to catch a few raindrops. Hunger gets worse. The only food we get is a mid-day warm, brownish liquid called "soup". It comes in a large kettle. We line up, but have not cup or bowl. A small pail is handed to us. It has to be divided by 20 inmates. How? One after another is allowed just a few sips. By the time it reaches the last few of us, nothing is left of the soup. Fights erupt. Hungry, frustrated, desperate women scream and push – but the kettle is empty.

I am forceful enough to push to the front of the line. Tortured by hunger and thirst, I drink a few drops of the brown, terribly smelling water from the rusty pipes again.

One of the girls I helped during the march takes me to the side and pushes something cold and slippery into my hand. It is a small piece of rotten potato. It's raw. We take turns sucking on it – then she finishes it.

We spend days awaiting "our turn" to be finished off. There is no work for us. Stupor and resignation push the fear into the background. Day and night we see flames from the crematoria smokestacks. Odor of the burning flesh hangs heavy in the air. There is, however, not enough time to kill all of us. The Russians must be near because the crematoria ceased night operations. It is a giveaway in the darkness – a target for bombs. We hear air raids. But why don't they bomb us??? After ten weeks of starvation, horrors and complete deprivation of the most basic needs (e.g. a cup or bowl, a piece of rag to wipe oneself, a little straw to sleep on, a cover from the bitter cold, etc.). We are evacuating Auschwitz. Three days later the Russian Army liberated Krakow.

Until the time in Auschwitz, I had no difficulty writing. The smallest details I remembered clearly – but there is obviously a limit to how much a mind can take before certain events are shut out. Subconscious self-defense? Is it? Maybe?

JANUARY 1945

We are about to leave Auschwitz. We are lined up in long columns. It takes hours. There must be thousands of prisoners leaving. We don't know where we will be going, but we are glad to leave the crematoria behind us. I never thought, during the long terrible wait, that I would leave Auschwitz alive. Each of us is given 2 small loaves of bread. It is more than I have seen in the past few weeks. Little do I know that it will have to last 14 days. We start our long journey on a cold, windy January day. All I have on is my threadbare burlap sack, no underwear, no stockings, no coat or blanket. My feet are wrapped in strips I tore off my sleeves. I can't lift my feet as I march for fear of loosing my lace-less shoes. Snow drifts. The roads are slippery; an icy wind is blowing. In no time my shoes are wet inside. The rags I stuffed inside chafe my frozen feet. Each step hurts but we have to march – driven without mercy by guards in jeeps or on motorcycles. They change daily. Every few minutes a body slumps to the frozen ground followed by a few shots. The roads are endless. Trucks full of uniformed Germans pass us. As we are pushed to the sides, many just stay put on the road in the snow – dead or exhausted. We rest at night wherever there is some shelter – mostly barns, sometimes in schools, at times just in the open. After a few days our bread supply is gone – finished. We eat snow to quench the constant thirst. We pass cities but do not see them. We are by now many days on the go. Roads are covered with dead bodies. Frostbitten limbs, exhaustion and hunger are taking their toll. I keep on moving like a zombie, one foot in front of the other. My hands are purple and numb and so are my ears. The soles of my shoes are open. I slush through mud and snow on swollen, numb feet. I don't know how much longer I can go on. Each step requires a superhuman effort. If I could just lie down in the soft, white snow and fall asleep into a deep, long sleep – and drift into oblivion. I escaped the ovens – just to freeze to death now? No. I have to go on. After a few days I am beyond feeling the cold anymore. I will never know where I got the strength from to go on marching. At times people pass us. They look at us in such bewilderment. We must look like ghosts.

We terminated our death march 14 days later in Bergen-Belsen.

I don't recall whether someone told me, or I read it, that of the 18,000 prisoners who left that day from Auschwitz, only 5,000 survived the march (and that was only from our march alone).

BERGEN-BELSEN - JANUARY 15, 1945

With the last of my strength I reach the barrack and collapse. I don't know how long I "was out". Two women push and pull me. I must get out of the way. With a tremendous effort I try to take a few steps but my legs just buckle under me. Some kind soul holds a rusty, broken spoon to my mouth and forces my parched lips open. A few drops of lukewarm liquid reach my throat. A few more sips and I sit up. Every bone, every muscle aches. My hands and ears are numb. My feet are grotesquely swollen. No shoes, only a few shreds of rags stick in the cracks between my toes. I must have lost my shoes. How will I manage in the snow barefoot? Little did I know at that moment that I would not be able to walk for a long time to come.

Three months of the most torturous inhumane existence follows. Our daily food intake consists of a bowl of lukewarm, smelly liquid with an occasional miniscule bit of rotten turnip swimming in it. In eight weeks we do not receive a single crumb of solid food or an ounce of bread. 250 women packed together, lying on the sawdust covered floor. When it rains (or snows) the sawdust turns into mud. With a superhuman effort I crawl on all four out of the barrack to relieve myself. I have diarrhea. There are pits dug in the frozen, muddy, clay soil that serves as our latrine. My thirst is so great that I eat the dirty snow. The stench in the barrack is horrendous, like being in a sewer. Starvation, filthy conditions, bugs and lice cause an outbreak of dysentery and typhoid. The epidemic rages incessantly. It spreads like brushfire. People lie in their own excrement too ill to care. Hundreds die of the epidemic. Swarms of lice and vermin eating at the little remaining flesh. Cadavers are removed but not quickly enough. They remain lying among the still living. Rats scurry around eating away at the limbs of the dead. We are left to die of starvation, thirst and the quickly spreading disease. It becomes clear to me that this is the END. Slow death, without ovens or poisonous gas. All I want is a few drops of water. There has been no water supply for a couple of weeks. It is impossible to describe the hunger. It is so intense, it drives me mad. A hunger so great people turn into savages. Some go completely berserk, tear the cadavers open in an attempt to each the insides. Someone must have alerted the "sanitary squad." They come to remove the corpses.

I am spared the hell of the last few weeks. The cumulative toll of the harrowing, long march in the icy cold; starvation; dehydration, dysentery and typhoid cause my becoming delirious with a high fever. I am unconscious when, on April 15, 1945, the British Army liberates Bergen-Belsen.

When found by the liberators, I am a mere black skeleton lying amongst corpses, more dead than alive. Had the British arrived 24 hours later, it would have been too late. I am told that the liberators found evidence leading to a plan Germans had to blow up the entire camp.

After ten weeks in a German hospital, I am transferred on a stretcher to a boat – a Red Cross transport to Sweden.

Upon my arrival in Sweden I weigh 66 pounds.

I was deprived of six years of my life. There was no transition from a happy childhood to the traumatic years I had to face.

now that the war ended, where do I go? I am in a vacuum. Provided I regain my health, what do I do with my life? How do I detach myself from the horrors of the traumatic past? I am left damaged.

The human capacity for endurance is incredible.

I SURVIVED – but I was not "the master of my fate." It was not my ingenuity, cunning or resourcefulness. However, there were a few people instrumental in my survival. For those of us who are alive today the inevitable question, "Why me?" will remain unanswered. FATE?

ADDENDUM

There were some difficult times during my six months hospitalization. I was very ill. Only thanks to the dedicated care of the staff, I pulled through. When the time came to leave, I was petrified – it meant losing my security. The prospect of facing the outside world, after all those years, was just too scary. I had no one and no place to go. To ease us into the world, a large group of us was transferred to a convalescent camp, where we were permitted to move about freely. A special pass was issued if one wanted to spend a few hours outside the grounds. I will never, never forget my first outing:

Dressed in nice clothes, with 7 Kroners in my pocket I set out. Free at last. I could have skipped and danced with joy, but instead I walked sedately, smiling at the passerby as I walked though the streets of Stratenbo. It was an indescribable feeling of exhilaration to be free. A delicious aroma of coffee prompted me to enter a small coffeehouse. I sat at a little table near the white curtained window and ordered coffee with whipped cream and a whole tray of pastry (6-7 pieces). Just the mere idea of being able to do it made me happy. I feasted my eyes on the goodies, but only tasted a spoonful of each, thinking of the time I dreamed of finding a rotten potato peel in the garbage. I inserted a coin in the jukebox, a mellow voice of a crooner singing "Fascination" in English filled the little room. Tears were streaming down my face. I was overcome by emotions: sadness, happiness – I could not stop crying. To this very day, when I hear the song "Fascination" I think of my first day of freedom in a little town in Sweden.

At the end of my stay in the convalescent camp, I applied to the hospital for a volunteer position. I started as a nurse's aid and gradually reached a higher level. I worked in two hospitals (in Djursholm and Stocksund). In the evening, I took courses in preparation for a nursing career. I refused the minimal wages offered me. It was my way of thanking the people who not only gave me back my health, but restored my faith in humanity. I will always have fond memories of Sweden and the kind people who helped me in the darkest hours of my life.

I learned Swedish in no time and spoke it fluently. I made friends and was no longer lonely. Out of the blue I received a letter from New York from my young step uncle. A few weeks before, I was able, through the help of the Red Cross, to locate my aunt in Buenos Aires. She was eager to bring me over, but the Argentinean government did not permit Jews to enter the country. So my aunt contacted her half-brother, who in turn offered to send me a visa for the United States. I felt ambivalent – to stay or to leave – it was a very difficult decision to make. Just as I made a home and a place for myself amongst the people I liked and respected – to leave suddenly? It meant to uproot my newly established existence and to face a new, strange world.

NEW YORK

Well, I arrived in New York on a dark and dismal October day, 1947. It was not an easy transition. I was penniless and did not speak a word of English.

After a few weeks I found work as a baby nurse. For a few weeks I attended an evening class to learn English. What helped me more was listening to the radio a lot. I also read the dictionary as a past-time to improve my vocabulary.

I worked for ten years as a dental assistant with two European dentists, who taught me all phases of their profession. This position was followed by thirty years of working with a renowned professor of cardiology and nephrology. I have learned a lot – it was most stimulating and enriching. I retired after his demise.

I have always worked and lived in Manhattan, which has given me a chance to enjoy the many cultural events available. Throughout the years I have also traveled extensively.

In 1951 I married Joseph Weinrauch, a kind, loving, very supportive man. He brought stability and security into my life – something I had not had since my childhood.

We had one daughter, Arlene, a very bright, intelligent, gifted girl. She died at the age of 41 from breast cancer. A tragic loss – no parents should ever experience.

In April 2006 I lost my husband Joe after a long illness. We were married for 55 years. Now I am once again all alone – facing a sad, lonely autumn of my life.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

I have tried repeatedly through the International Red Cross and Jewish agencies to find out what happened to my parents and sister that fateful day in 1941. The search and inquires were unsuccessful.

Three years ago I found out from someone from my hometown that my parents and sister were taken with a group of people to a forest nearby our city, where they were shot after having to dig their own graves. An eyewitness who escaped told the story.

My father Maximilian Weinstock was 59 years old
My mother Gisela Weinstock was 46 years old
My sister Erna Weinstock was 22 years old
when they were killed.

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